‘Neighbourhood Effects’: Can we measure them and does it matter?

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Editorial Note

Ruth Lupton is a Research Fellow at CASE, where she has been working on a longitudinal study of disadvantaged areas and neighbourhoods in England and Wales.

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Abstract

Renewed interest in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is generating increasing research activity. Current work includes qualitative community studies and quantitative investigations of area effects on individual outcomes. This paper criticises the contribution of area effects research to date. Methodological and data constraints mean that quantitative studies often operationalise a weak conception of neighbourhood that does not reflect the understanding gained from qualitative work. These constraints present a barrier to testing specific theories that might usefully inform policy, while exaggerated claims are made about the policy relevance of more generic work. The paper concludes that area effects should be accorded less significance in the broad debate on area-based policy. Multi-disciplinary work is needed to develop studies that can influence the design of specific programmes.

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Neighbourhoods in the Ascendancy

Rarely has the neighbourhood enjoyed as high a profile in public policy as it does today. In Whitehall, a Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) has been established to coordinate the implementation of a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. Local Strategic Partnerships have been formed to develop integrated local strategies for neighbourhood renewal, supported by a Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. New schemes for neighbourhood management are being piloted and, in some areas, forming an integral part of plans for devolution of local authority services and for the revival of local democracy. There has been a proliferation of area-based initiatives (ABIs), not just the comprehensive New Deal for Communities area regeneration programme, but Action Zones for health, education and employment, and area-targeted programmes such as Excellence in Cities and Sure Start. A Neighbourhood Statistics Service has been established within the Office for National Statistics to enable the identification of problems and trends at a smaller spatial scale than was ever previously possible.

Academic work on neighbourhoods is similarly blossoming, building on a long tradition of community studies but unquestionably fuelled by the expansion of neighbourhood-based policy and the availability of new data. The NRU has even established its own research division, commissioning academic work to inform policy development. Reflecting the extent and diversity of current activity, the Economic and Social Research Council has funded a Neighbourhood Research Centre to synthesise existing research and provide a critical academic focus in this important policy area. Neighbourhood research, as well as neighbourhood policy, is in the ascendancy.

A closer look at the academic work on neighbourhoods reveals that it has two distinct strands. One, which is probably still dominant, is the community study, traditionally the domain of sociologists, social anthropologists and social geographers. As Glennerster *et al.* (1999) noted, this area of work has a long history. Community studies adopt a case study approach, making use mainly but not exclusively of qualitative methods, and tend to concentrate only on disadvantaged areas, not on comparison between neighbourhoods of differing socio-economic status. They aim to explore the internal dynamics of neighbourhoods, and to understand their place within wider social and economic systems. They treat the neighbourhood as the unit of enquiry, rather than the individual. Recent examples of this approach include our own work in CASE (Power and Mumford 1999, Lupton 2001), among many others (see for example Forrest and Kearns 1999, Meegan and Mitchell 2001).

A second strand of work reflects a growing interest in the effects of neighbourhoods on individual social and economic outcomes. Here, the neighbourhood as an entity is of less interest than its impact on the people who live in it. Researchers are typically economists or quantitative sociologists, using quantitative techniques and large samples drawn from national datasets. They are concerned not just with deprived but also non-deprived neighbourhoods, and the differences between them. Work of this latter kind developed in the US in the 1980s as a response to concerns about the emergence of a ghetto 'underclass'. Poor neighbourhoods could be seen as systematically disadvantaging their residents and isolating them from opportunity structures (Wilson 1987), or enabling the spread of anti-social norms through peer influences (Crane 1991). A large research literature was spawned, examining neighbourhood effects on child development, educational outcomes, delinquency, teen pregnancy, health, employment and earnings, and usually finding evidence of significant but small neighbourhood effects (Jencks and Mayer 1990, Ellen and Turner 1997, Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). In Britain, the research effort has been much more limited, growing mainly in the second half of the 1990s, in response to concern about growing spatial polarisation. A typical example is Buck's analysis of data from the British Household Panel Study, looking at a range of outcome measures (labour market engagement, entry into jobs, non-monetary poverty measures and flows in and out of poverty), against a range of individual variables, local unemployment rates and area deprivation scores (Buck 2001). There has also been a specific body of work focusing on health inequalities and the effect of place, again demonstrating that both area effects and individual effects matter (Graham 2000). The apparent value of this kind of work is that it goes beyond explaining what is going on at the neighbourhood level to assess its importance relative to other influences. It can thus indicate the likely impact of neighbourhood-focused policy interventions, relative to those focused on individuals.

These two strands of work arise from different academic disciplines and tend to co-exist rather than to be fully integrated. Nevertheless there is a general acceptance that they are complementary and that they both have an important contribution to make to policy. Buck (2001), for example, has asserted that interest by quantitative social scientists in the influence of place could be a

> "basis for healing the split in sociology identified by Coleman (1986) between the community study tradition and the survey research tradition largely based on individual–level data" (p2251).

Quantitative measurement of place effects on people is seen as strengthening the evidence base, derived from qualitative area-based studies, that 'place matters'. By introducing contextual variables into the individual characteristics/individual outcomes equation, it can re-introduce the role of the

social system into analyses of individual behaviour and outcomes. Moreover it can measure and prove the influence of the social system, rather than simply explaining it, thus providing a sound basis for policy decisions. Neighbourhood effects research can thus 'beef up' evidence from qualitative studies to inform governments about the likely influence of policies targeted at areas, while qualitative community studies can continue to identify mechanisms to be tested by quantitative researchers, as well as delivering an understanding of the conditions in which policies will be implemented and the processes of implementation on the ground.

This, then, appears to be a happy state of affairs in which different academic disciplines combine to enhance knowledge about the extent to which government should invest in area policies and how they should be implemented. In this paper, I take a more critical view.

Firstly, I suggest that 'neighbourhood effects' research is not necessarily complementary with qualitative research on neighbourhoods, and that in its current state it should not be welcomed so uncritically. There are tensions between the conceptual and methodological approaches of the two strands of work, and there are serious operational problems arising partly but not exclusively from data constraints. I argue that qualitative researchers need to collaborate more critically with their quantitative colleagues to overcome these difficulties and make sure that neighbourhood effects research is theoretically informed and thus reliable in its findings, rather than accepting it with any enthusiasm in its current state.

Secondly, I argue that neighbourhood effects research is not nearly as important to policy as is usually suggested. I suggest that area-based policies are not dependent on the existence of neighbourhood effects, and that most would be implemented anyway, even if no neighbourhood effects were found. In its current, somewhat crude, form, neighbourhood effects research will have only a marginal impact on policy decisions. Much more specific forms of neighbourhood effects enquiry, on the other hand, have a high degree of policy relevance, and should be actively developed, with, of course, a close eye, on the methodological problems previously mentioned.

What's Wrong with Neighbourhood Effects Research?

The principal basis for my argument that quantitative neighbourhood effects research does not necessarily complement qualitative neighbourhood studies is that it fails to reflect the complex conceptualisation of neighbourhood that has arisen from these studies. Because it operates with a very weak concept of

neighbourhood, its findings are in some cases almost meaningless and possibly misleading. Moreover, the more complex conceptualisation can 'get lost' while much attention and debate is given to the weaker one.

Incorporated in what I describe as the 'complex conceptualistion of neighbourhood' are three broad understandings of neighbourhood derived from qualitative research. One is that the concept of neighbourhood incorporates both place and people, and that it is the interaction of people and place that creates neighbourhood characteristics. A second is that neighbourhoods are not fixed. They are neither bounded entities nor do they have objective characteristics that are experienced in the same way by all their inhabitants. A third is that neighbourhoods cannot be seen in isolation. Their characteristics are shaped by their relationship to other places as well as by their internal features. In this section, I briefly explore these ideas and review the extent to which quantitative neighbourhood effects researchers have been able to deal with them in the design of their work.

People and Places

The first issue relates to characteristics of neighbourhoods and the relationship between people and place. Theorists of neighbourhood generally agree that neighbourhoods are both physical and social spaces. Galster (2001) defines them as "bundles of spatially-based attributes" (p2112) including:

- Environmental characteristics – topographical features, pollution etc.
- Proximity characteristics, influenced both by location and transport infrastructure.
- Characteristics of the buildings – type, design, materials, density, repair etc.
- Infrastructural characteristics – roads, streetscape etc.
- Demographic characteristics of the population.
- Class status characteristics of the population.
- The existence and quality of local services.
- Political characteristics – political networks, involvement of residents etc.
- Social-interactive characteristics – friend and family networks, associations, strength of social control forces etc.
- Sentimental characteristics – sense of identification with place, historical significance etc.

Some of these clearly relate to the people who inhabit the neighbourhood, others to the geography. They are highly correlated with one another, making it difficult to untangle causality. One problem is that poor people are selected into poor neighbourhoods by a process of residential sorting. Lupton and Power (2002) have described neighbourhoods as having 'intrinsic' characteristics that are well established and hard to change, such as their housing stock and

economic base. The nature of these characteristics, in relation to those of other neighbourhoods, determines who comes to live there. This problem is often referred to in the quantitative literature as selection bias (Harding 2002). But the bigger challenge is to reflect that neighbourhoods are simultaneously physical and social. Physical characteristics, through their impact on population mix, lead neighbourhoods to 'acquire' certain other characteristics, such as services and facilities, reputation, social order and patterns of social interaction, as people and place interact. For example, disadvantaged individuals in an isolated area will form one set of social relations, while disadvantaged individuals in a well-connected area may form another. The nature of social relations may itself impact on individual decisions to stay or move, and on individual outcomes, such as employment or health (i.e. they are not exogenous). Thus neighbourhoods are not fixed entities, independent of the people who live in them. They are being constantly re-created as the people who live in them simultaneously consume and produce them.

Size and Boundaries

The second conceptual issue arising from qualitative neighbourhood studies is that of boundaries.

Massey (1994) has persuasively argued that neighbourhoods cannot be regarded as containers in which social interactions take place, but rather as overlapping sets of social networks. Some activities, like work, may be carried out many miles away; others, like mutual support, only with the space of a few streets. Glennerster *et al*. (1999) thus conceptualised neighbourhoods as being made up of layers of interactions, like the layers of an onion, but also as overlapping rings, defined by the travel areas for different activities or the boundaries drawn by service providers. Kearns and Parkinson (2001), adapting from the work of Suttles (1972) suggested that neighbourhood exists at three levels. One, the home area, has a psycho-social purpose, fostering attachment and belonging, demonstrating and reflecting one's values and making connections with others. A second, the locality, is the locale for residential activities, and denotes social status and provision. Local housing markets and the provision of local shops and services operate at this level. Finally, the urban district or region provides a wider landscape of social and economic opportunities. Thus when people reflect on the characteristics of their area, they may simultaneously make reference to the friendliness of their next door neighbours, the quality of local schools or parks, and the atmosphere and facilities of the city centre and the job opportunities within an even broader travel-to-work area. Different boundaries of 'area' make sense for different aspects.

Moreover, the size of these relevant boundaries will vary from one place to another. The size and shape of spheres of influence is determined by the

characteristics of the natural and built environment and the forms of local political, economic and social interaction. For example, workers in an isolated mining valley with a tradition of local employment may legitimately consider the local labour market to be predominantly contained within the boundary of their town, while similarly skilled workers in an inner London borough with good transport links may perceive the local labour market to extend well beyond their neighbourhood or even borough. Determining the relevant boundary for any neighbourhood studied is, therefore, difficult, and applying the same size boundaries across different areas and to measure different issues is fraught with problems.

Neighbourhoods in Relationship to The Wider World

The third understanding of neighbourhood that emerges from the qualitative literature is that the characteristics of neighbourhoods and their effects on the people who live in them are not wholly internal to particular neighbourhoods, but are determined partially by the relationship of one neighbourhood to another, objectively and subjectively.

Forrest and Kearns explain that

> "the neighbourhood in which we live can play an important part in socialisation (into the wider society) not only through its internal composition and dynamics but also according to how it is seen by residents in other neighbourhoods and by the institutions and agencies which play a key role in opportunity structures. Thus the identity and contextual roles of the neighbourhood are closely linked to one another. Residential identities are embedded in a strongly comparative psychological landscape in which each neighbourhood is known primarily as a counterpart to some of the others, and relative differences are probably more important than any single and widely shared social characteristic. As counterparts to one another, neighbourhoods seem to acquire their identity through an on-going commentary between themselves and this continuous dialogue between different groups and agencies shapes the cognitive map of the city and establishes good and bad reputations. These reputations may cling to some neighbourhoods longer than others. Moreover, the external perceptions of areas impact on the behaviour and attitudes of residents in ways which may reinforce cohesive groupings and further consolidate reputations" (2001. p2134).

The biggest 'area effect' uncovered by Atkinson and Kintrea (2001) was on the perceived reputation of the area and its importance in structuring opportunities

and experiences for the residents of the two deprived areas they looked at. In the two deprived areas, 33% and 25% of residents said the reputation of the area made getting a job more difficult, compared with 0% and 0.5% in the mixed areas. Perceived reputation seemed to matter to them regardless of the extent of actual discrimination. As in other studies (Lupton 2003; Dean and Hastings 2000, Bowman 2001), there was a tension between how people spoke of their own neighbourhood and the consciousness of how they thought it was perceived from the outside. A majority in both the poor neighbourhoods thought that their neighbourhood had a poor reputation in the city but that this was not an accurate reflection of what it was like to live there. The stigma effect seemed to be stronger in the deprived neighbourhood in Edinburgh, a prosperous city, than Glasgow, possibly indicating that relative stigma is greater where income relativities are greater and where there are fewer areas at the bottom of the social scale. Atkinson and Kintrea concluded that "the context in which the neighbourhood sits is also a very important influence on neighbourhood outcomes" (p2295).

Dealing with the complexity of neighbourhoods in the design of neighbourhood effects research.

The implications of these findings are that complex research designs are needed in order to capture the mechanisms at work.

(A) REFLECTING PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL SPACES

In the first place, both physical and social aspects must be considered as potential causes of difference. This is, indeed, recognised in the theoretical literature. Drawing on Jencks and Mayer's (1990) categorisation, Buck (2001) usefully summarised possible mechanisms by which areas might have an impact on people. These include mechanisms relating to the other people who live in the area as well as to its physical and institutional characteristics.

- Epidemic: by which norms are spread via peer group influences.
- Collective socialisation: by which adults influence young people as role models or by supervision.
- Institutional: the differential provision of services.
- Competition: between neighbourhoods for scarce resources.
- Social networks: the extent to which individuals can link to more advantaged groups.
- Expectations: based on personal experience and the experience of others.
- Discrimination.
- Insecurity: because the risks to personal safety may be greater in some areas and protective resources smaller.
- Physical isolation and barriers to wider opportunities.

The list thus incorporates mechanisms appealing to both of the positions usually associated with the area effects debate: one that the poor might be bad for each other – or as Buck puts it

> "does it make my life chances worse if my neighbour is poor rather than rich or a large proportion of my neighbours are poor, or disadvantaged on some other dimension?" (2001 p2252)

– and the other that poor people are systematically disadvantaged by living in areas which are under-resourced and have weak comparative advantages.

However, most studies of area effects do not include variables relating to physical or institutional characteristics of areas, only those related to population composition. Principally because of lack of data about anything else, they tend to use one or a small number of indicators, such as the poverty rate, average income level, or proportion of adults in higher status jobs (Ellen and Turner 1997). It may be the case that, because negative physical and institutional characteristics tend to be strongly correlated with concentrated poverty, their effects will be indirectly picked up by studies of these measures, but there is also a danger that potentially important factors will be overlooked by reliance on population composition variables.

B) USING APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES

Secondly, the boundaries used for neighbourhoods must be relevant to the mechanism being tested. Thus, if it is thought that unemployment is influenced by labour demand in the travel-to-work area, this unit of analysis should be used to test whether area labour demand affects individual unemployment. If health is thought to be influenced by neighbourhood social capital, postcode sectors or wards might be the nearest approximate unit of analysis. As Burgess *et al.* (2001) note, in their analysis of earnings capacity and poverty risk in adulthood using US data,

> "in studies of area effects the appropriate geographical unit will depend up on the kinds of mechanisms being examined. For example, in the case of peer group influences one may think that the relevant area would be rather small, perhaps just a few neighbouring streets. But to take another example, researching the impact of local institutions on local people may require consideration of a much larger region".

However, data constraints mean that theoretical considerations of this nature are often abandoned. Dietz (2002) observes that

> "neighbourhood definitions have typically not been formed by thoughtful theoretical considerations. Rather neighbourhood

> delineation has been defined by the limitations of an available data set" (p541).

The geographical units of analysis used are often acknowledged to be too large to have any explanatory power. For example, Burgess *et al.* only have access to one unit of area and cannot adjust it to test specific mechanisms. Nor are they able to use a smaller unit than the US county (with a typical population of about 80,000), which they concede

> "may be too aggregated an area to capture all potential influences of their immediate neighbourhood" (2001: p15).

McCulloch and Joshi (2000) use electoral ward as the unit of analysis, because it is available. While they note that ward is a political boundary and therefore arbitrary, they nevertheless continue to use it and to claim, with no justification given, that it "represents a useful framework for analysis" (p.8). In a further article, McCulloch (2001) discusses at length the problems of boundaries, but uses electoral wards with no theoretical justification or comment on the implications for his results.

Recent developments suggest the possibility of more sophisticated approaches. MacAllister *et al*. (2001) used 'bespoke neighbourhoods' drawn around the homes of respondents to surveys, each neighbourhood comprising the nearest *n* people to the respondent's home, and Burgess *et al*., in new ESRC-funded research, plan to develop this approach using Census and administrative data to create overlapping geographies for different effects.[1] Deitz (2002) suggests the use of spatial econometric models in which it is assumed that all individuals interact with each other, but with declining influence according to increasing distance, thus using distance weighting rather than a fixed boundary.

These are promising developments, giving the potential to draw different boundaries for different hypothesised effects. However, they are as yet relatively new. Findings of most area effects research are still based on cruder spatial delineations.

C) REFLECTING DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

The boundary problem arises because people use social space in different ways for different activities. The neighbourhood for one activity is not the same as the neighbourhood for another. By the same token, different people have different experiences of social space, depending on their own life circumstances and

[1] ESRC Research Award H333250042. Details at www.regard.ac.uk.

relationships. Thus a third consideration is to reflect these individual differences in assessing neighbourhood effects.

One issue is that neighbourhood might mean *more* to some people than to others. Forrest and Kearns (2001) describe a widely accepted view that the neighbourhood is relatively more important for many people in low income communities than for people in more advantaged areas.

> "Because of high unemployment, high levels of lone parenthood and perhaps a high number of poor pensioner households, residents of poor neighbourhoods spend more time in their local areas than do residents of wealthier neighbourhoods. Thus…the context effects of neighbourhoods may be particularly marked in the most disadvantaged areas" (p2132).

Empirically, Atkinson and Kintrea (1998) found that social renters and owners on the same estates in Scotland had very different levels of interaction with their neighbourhood. Renters conducted 60% of their daily activities within the neighbourhood and activities inside the neighbourhood did not tend to involve networking with others. Owners conducted three-quarters of their activities *outside* the neighbourhood, and in 90% of these cases they were not in contact with other people from their own estates. Work and car use enabled out-of-neighbourhood activities.

It is also evident that neighbourhood might have *different meanings* to people in different points in the life course, with different circumstances or different characteristics. Ellen and Turner (1997) argued that some people might have strong social networks, sources of support or other resources that would mitigate the effects of neighbourhood. Boys and girls, blacks and whites might be differently affected by neighbourhoods. Atkinson and Kintrea (2000) found that women tended to be more involved in the neighbourhood than men, regardless of tenure, because children's activities were often locally based. McCulloch and Joshi (2000) argued that children of different ages experience neighbourhoods differently. In early childhood, transactions outside the home are limited and qualified by parents. Older children are influenced more directly by peers, teachers and other adults, and adolescents have a wider range of formal and informal neighbourhood associations. Forrest and Kearns (2001) note that the same logic can be applied to adults of different ages. They suggest that it is pertinent to ask "for whom does neighbourhood matter?" rather than just "does neighbourhood matter?"

Capturing these complex relationships between individual and neighbourhood is difficult but maybe not impossible. One approach would be to distinguish between different groups of individuals in terms of their hypothesised

relationship with their neighbourhood, as well as in terms of their individual characteristics – to test, for example, whether neighbourhood effects on employment outcomes are greater for people whose tenure and family relationships suggest strong bonds to the neighbourhood than for those of similar skill levels who are weakly bonded to the neighbourhood. Another approach would be to draw different neighbourhood boundaries for different people, recognising that what constitutes the neighbourhood for one is not the same as for another. Galster (1986) suggested that different boundaries could be drawn for different groups of individuals (such as people in a certain income band or ethnic group) according to three measures:

- congruence of their externality space (i.e the area over which changes in attributes are perceived as changing the well-being that any individual derives from the location) with predetermined geographical boundaries.
- generality (the degree to which externality spaces for different neighbourhood characteristics correspond).
- accordance between the externality spaces of different individuals.

He suggested that this could be operationalised by collecting individual-level data on perceived externality space, either through surveys or through observations of actual behaviour in order to map individual externality spaces and calculate the degree of accordance among them. The obvious difficulties with this approach are the need for sufficiently large samples in any given neighbourhood, and the laborious gathering of data for neighbourhood definitional purposes.

D) Reflecting the Relationships between Neighbourhoods

A fourth issue is that, if neighbourhood status is important, measures and perceptions of it need to be incorporated within quantitative models of neighbourhood effects. However, as Dietz (2002) notes, almost all the existing research examines 'within neighbourhood effects', assuming no interaction between neighbourhoods. Thus

> "neighbourhoods with identical characteristics but dissimilar neighbouring characteristics are considered equivalent" (p541).

He advocates the use of spatial duration hazard models, to provide a statistical measure of the differences between neighbourhoods of varying proximity, which can be factored in to the neighbourhood effects equation. Measures of within urban area segregation might also be incorporated.

The Value of Atheoretical Approaches

Thus far, I have discussed the problems of measuring the extent to which neighbourhoods have an effect based on the assumption that quantitative studies are theoretically informed, i.e. that they are designed in order to test specific mechanisms for the transmission of neighbourhood effects. My contention has been that quantitative studies need to be sufficiently sophisticated to measure the complexity of the neighbourhood phenomenon, otherwise they are at risk of pronouncing that there are no neighbourhood effects simply because they have not been able to measure them. In a recent lecture, William Julius Wilson (2003) similarly argued that neighbourhood effects are underplayed because of the crudeness of the measures used. He proposed that cultural factors, including the reinforcing effect on individual self-efficacy of living in a neighbourhood where most others also lack self efficacy, are largely responsible for neighbourhood effects, but are typically not measured by quantitative studies.

However, one might also argue that claims about the existence of neighbourhood effects need not necessarily rest on theoretically-driven approaches. A first step is simply to test whether there are differences in outcome between similar individuals living in different kinds of area. If there are, then specific mechanisms can be explored. If there are not, then there are no neighbourhood effects, arising from any mechanism, and it does not matter whether the measures used have been sophisticated enough to test one mechanism or another. However, even this more limited kind of testing requires careful design based on a theoretical understanding of neighbourhood.

Firstly, different spatial levels must be included, in order to pick up potential effects at different levels. I have already indicated that this is problematic because of data constraints.

Secondly, a wide range of comparator variables should ideally be used to distinguish between neighbourhoods. Studies that conclude that there are no differences in (for example) health outcome for matched individuals living in poor neighbourhoods (defined by the number of other people in poverty) compared with rich neighbourhoods, may not be particularly useful, unless we know that there are also no differences between those living in neighbourhoods with different levels of health provision, different levels of environmental pollution, different access to healthy food and so on. This difficulty is recognised by some researchers, in passing. Buck, for example, notes that there are a number of intrinsic area effects that do not necessarily follow from population characteristics, such as features of the built environment and quality of local services, but states that “these are not a primary concern of this paper” (2001: p 2253) without giving any theoretical reason for not including them.

McCulloch and Joshi (2000: p8) use a compound deprivation score to test area effects on health, because it has "the advantage of simplicity in allowing areas to be ranked against each other for statistical comparisons", while acknowledging that it fails to capture neighbourhood characteristics "considered most relevant to neighbourhood effects on individuals by most researchers investigating neighbourhood effects", such as social capital, levels of violence and quality of services. However, lack of data means that crude measures tend to be used nonetheless, and are relied upon because, on the whole, they are assumed to be highly correlated with other, unavailable measures. The best that can be done is to acknowledge that the missing variables may be important, perhaps even more important than the ones that are included, but to report on findings nonetheless. CASE's proposed work matching service provision indicators, such as GP provision, to individual level data from the ALSPAC study[2], is a promising development, but only possible because the data is localised and the subjects are therefore densely distributed across neighbourhoods, allowing sufficient observations per neighbourhood. The availability of neighbourhood-level service quality data that can be linked to individual data in national datasets is still some way off.

Thirdly, there needs to be some mechanism for reflecting the interactions between people and place, in order not to identify neighbourhood effects that really arise from individuals, or vice versa. This problem is widely recognised (Ellen and Turner 1997). Buck notes that the key methodological issue is that

> "individuals interact with their neighbourhoods in complex ways which may in the end make it difficult to disentangle the individual from the area either conceptually or in terms of data" (2001: p2258).

On the one hand, failing to account for important individual characteristics may lead to neighbourhood effects being overestimated. On the other, attempts to isolate area effects by controlling out individual characteristics can result in controlling out key characteristics of area that may have an influence. For example, McCulloch (2001) finds area effects on a range of individual outcomes that are weaker but still significant after controlling for individual characteristics such as age, ethnicity, education and household type, but not significant after controlling for individual deprivation, measured by council tenure and non-employment. This may be interpreted as meaning that apparent 'area effects' are really a product of individual deprivation. Alternatively, Council tenure or non-employment may themselves be effects of area, or indeed of living in another poor area in an earlier period of life. Untangling these

[2] Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children

relationships is a problem for qualitative researchers on area, and is probably the biggest and most intractable problem for those attempting a quantitative approach, making it difficult to be clear whether area effects appear to be small because they *are* small, or only because we are not able to measure them properly.

There are therefore, enormous difficulties for quantitative researchers in operationalising the conception of neighbourhood derived from qualitative studies, even at the stage of an exploratory, atheoretical investigation. The reduced versions of neighbourhood that are used in practice hardly do justice to the understanding built up through qualitative work, and in many ways represent a backward step, defining neighbourhoods as poor or non-poor, with fixed boundaries, and with similar impacts for individuals regardless of who they are and how they are connected. While some reductionism is, of course, inevitable for quantitative work, it should not be accepted uncritically, especially if the result is that policy is founded on weak results. It is incumbent on qualitative researchers, therefore, to work with their qualitative colleagues in a collaborative but critical way, to aid the development of more sophisticated operational models of neighbourhood, rather than simply letting them get on with it. Findings of quantitative research based on arbitrary boundaries or failing to control for different relationships between individuals and their neighbourhoods should not be accepted uncritically as a useful 'beefing up' of the evidence. Nor should qualitative research that makes generalised claims about neighbourhood effects based on small samples and lack of controls be accepted uncritically. Rather, one would hope that qualitative researchers could be encouraged to be more explicit about the mechanisms and outcomes that their work reveals, and that quantitative researchers could draw on this more directly to develop more sophisticated methodologies. We need an active and critical interaction between disciplines, not an enthusiastic co-existence.

Area Effects and Area Policy

These problems of data and methodology mean that results of area effects studies are often inconclusive and sometimes contradictory. Most studies find that areas do matter for individuals, which is not surprising to qualitative researchers embedded in understanding neighbourhoods' social meanings. However, Ellen and Turner, reviewing the literature, found that no consensus emerged about which characteristics affected which outcomes, which types of households might be most affected by neighbourhood or about the causal mechanisms involved. They suggested "some caution in interpreting the evidence" (1997: p833). Similar inconsistencies were reported by Harding (2002) in his review of the US literature and by McCulloch (2001), who noted

inconsistency in the findings of UK research, partly because of differences in theoretical or methodological approach.

Given that this is hardly a literature that provides a clear basis for policy, it is worth asking why it matters. How important is it for policy to know whether there are neighbourhood effects and how they are operating?

Knowing about neighbourhood effects on individual outcomes might be important for a number of policies that have nothing to do with areas. For example, understanding the psychological impacts of neighbourhoods might lead to more effective mental health interventions. However, in this country, the main claim that has been made for the importance of area effects research is that it provides evidence about whether or not to pursue area-targeted policies, and it is this claim upon which I concentrate here. As I indicated at the start of this paper, such policies have been a feature of the New Labour governments since 1997. In their early years of office, they introduced a rash of short-life special funding programmes, tackling specific social and economic problems via the establishment of local partnerships; Health, Education and Employment Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, Sure Start and the comprehensive New Deal for Communities. These kinds of programmes have been described as Area-Based Initiatives (ABIs): delivered locally, in selected areas, within limited boundaries, and additional to mainstream interventions. More latterly, policy has entered another phase, embodied in the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR) and in a wider set of urban, regional and housing policies. This has less emphasis on ABIs. It focuses on the mainstreaming of funding and partnership working over the longer term, and on reducing neighbourhood segregation through housing policy and urban revitalisation. Nevertheless, additional efforts and funds are still to be directed at the poorest local authorities and at neighbourhoods within the top 10% on the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Both phases of policy have been accompanied by a persistent refrain that it matters where you live. Living in a poor neighbourhood is assumed to confer additional disadvantages for individuals for many reasons: poor services and facilities, poor housing and environment, high crime, and high levels of worklessness creating low aspiration and under-achievement. As Atkinson and Kintrea state, within the government's neighbourhood policy

> "is implicated a belief that where people live affects their chances to participate in an 'inclusive society' over and above non-spatial explanatory social categories such as gender and class, and specific disadvantages such as unemployment or ill health" (2001 p 2277).

Indeed, the aim of the NSNR is that "no-one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live" (SEU 2001). Since 'moving people to opportunity' is not seriously considered as a policy option[3], these disadvantages need to be dismantled by addressing neighbourhood problems (such as crime or services) directly or by altering the socio-economic composition of areas to minimise peer effects of concentrated poverty.

It appears to follow that, if it did not matter where a person lived, investment in area-targeted policies would be unnecessary. On this basis, it is often argued that significant investment in area-based programmes can only be justified if significant levels of neighbourhood additionality are proven (Buck 2001). McCulloch and Joshi, for example, suggest that

> "understanding the extent to which geographically concentrated social and economic problems reinforce one another in leading to further negative outcomes is clearly a key issue in assessing whether specific area targeting is particularly effective" (2000 p6).

McCulloch argues that "the underlying rationale of area-based policies is that concentrations of deprivation give rise to problems greater than the sum of the parts" (2001: p667) and that if it were demonstrated that neighbourhood problems were attributable to compositional effects only, "people rather than areas should be targeted" (p668).

This argument can be made both from the perspective of narrowing inequalities between individuals and narrowing inequalities between areas. From the individual inequalities perspective, there would seem be no sense in trying to tackle inequalities by addressing area-specific problems if it could be demonstrated that it is no worse for an individual to live in one area than another. Thus, for example, if poor housing or high crime had no impact on individual outcomes such as health, its uneven distribution could be seen as unproblematic. Or, if high worklessness locally had no impact on the likelihood of low-skilled workers dropping out of the labour market, there would be no justification for additional programmes to encourage labour market attachment

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[3] In the United States, two experimental programmes have shown evidence of better outcomes for low-income individuals moving to higher income neighbourhoods. In Gautreaux, Chicago, public housing residents using rent subsidies to move to middle class suburbs had higher labour force participation, wages and educational outcomes than similar individuals moving to city neighbourhoods (Rosenbaum 1995). Similar results were found in the experimental 'Moving to Opportunity' programme across five US cities. However, as Harding (2002) points out, these results are based on self-selecting samples of people who want to move. Ethical questions, not least the implications for those left behind, make it unlikely that such programmes would be considered on a wide scale in the UK.

in work-poor areas. From the area inequalities perspective, if the gap in aggregate outcomes between areas were shown simply to reflect the composition of their populations, no additional return would be gained from investing in area-targeted initiatives over and above policies to tackle individual and household disadvantage. Thus if young women from low income homes were no more likely to become teen parents in an area where there were a lot of other similar people, there would be little point in running specific education programmes in these areas, because to do so would be tackling a presumed peer effect that did not exist. Instead, efforts would more sensibly be channelled into programmes directed at the target group wherever they lived, such as education or income support.

If one agrees with these propositions, it seems to be terribly important to know how much area matters for individuals. Knowing the strength of area effects appears to be central to policy. But is it? Only, I would suggest, if we think that the principal justification for area policies is that areas cause individual problems. In practice, it is not. The notion that there are area effects on individuals provides one justification for area-based policies but by no means the only one or the major one. One kind of area-based policy is that which is designed to address negative characteristics of the areas themselves, such as poor housing, high crime, lack of employment and lack of facilities and services. Such interventions are, by necessity, spatially targeted, but even where interventions are aimed at people not at places, there are other reasons for targeting them towards the most deprived areas. Buck has noted that there are equity reasons for ensuring a fairer re-distribution of public goods, and social cohesion reasons for ensuring that all members of society are linked in to services and enjoy reasonable living standards (Buck 2001). Smith (1999) listed a number of other reasons for aiming initiatives at particular places, related not to area effects but to equity and to implementation:

- Increasing polarisation gives a political and social justification for intervention.
- Spatial concentration of problems makes area-based programmes an efficient way of targeting resources. It makes sense to operate programmes in areas where there are large numbers of eligible clients. For example, a programme to provide mentoring for young people whose parents had been long-term unemployed would probably result in additional funding for certain youth clubs, schools or job centres to employ mentors, and end up being located in areas of high-long term unemployment. Similarly Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) note that because of their efficiency, neighbourhood-level interventions can be cost-effective even in the context of a small amount of explained ‘area effect’.
- Focusing activity can make more impact than dissipating it.

- Area-targeted programmes can more easily adopt a 'bottom-up' approach which can result in more efficient identification of problems and delivery of solutions.
- Local programmes may lead to increased confidence and capacity to participate in the community.
- Area-based programmes may be used as pilots to inform changes in delivery of mainstream programmes.

Kleinman (1998), within a paper that is essentially critical of the heavy emphasis given to ABIs rather than broader interventions to tackle inequalities, similarly argued:

> "I am not opposing area-focused programmes – quite the reverse. My own research on urban regeneration and on employability initiatives has convinced me that programmes work best when they are based on genuine partnerships, on the commitment at all levels of the private and public sector partners and on a clear understanding of the local environment" (p3).

Seen from this perspective, area effects seem to be less central to the policy question. If they were found to be strong, this would be another powerful reason for investing in targeted programmes. But if they were found to be negligible, area programmes would still have a rationale.

A useful analogy can perhaps be drawn with the debate on school improvement. Much research has been undertaken to establish the size of the school effect, compared with the effect of home or background factors. This has established that the school effect is relatively small, accounting for only about 8-10% of the difference in individual educational outcomes (Mortimore 1997) and it is obvious that both school-level and wider interventions are needed to close the gap in educational attainment. One could argue that if the school effect were much greater, more investment should be aimed at changing what schools do. But finding that the school effect is small does not mean that all efforts at school improvement should be abandoned. There are overall benefits to society in raising the standard of educational provision, equity arguments for closing the gap in the quality of education between schools, and implementation arguments for delivering educational change at school level. Knowing the strength of the school effect helps us to decide on the balance between school improvement and other interventions, and to think more clearly about why we are intervening, but it does not negate the arguments for school improvement per se. Similarly knowing the strength of the area effect helps us to see how much could be gained in terms of individual outcomes by intervening at area level, but leaves other reasons for area-based interventions unaltered.

Does this mean that we should give up on trying to measure area effects? On the contrary, quantitative area effects research potentially has a key policy role, but in a specific, rather than a general sense. Specific research could be valuable in informing us which area-based policies are most worthwhile and how they should be implemented. Knowledge about who is affected by area, at what point in the life course, and how much, could be very important. For example, if we knew how much poor housing impacted on educational attainment for children of different ages, we would be in a better position to decide family housing policy and to intervene at the right stages with compensatory educational measures. If we knew how much neighbourhood factors contributed to likelihood of re-offending, and whether these operated via direct peer effects, social norms or economic factors, we would be in a better position to design prison after-care programmes. Knowing the impact of neighbourhood factors, as opposed to individual and national factors, on fear of crime, and knowing the transmission mechanisms, would help us to develop effective responses. However, such knowledge would require more sophisticated studies based on better data than we currently have available.

Another critical contribution could be to the specific policy issue of social mix. It has been argued that socially mixed neighbourhoods work better than low-income communities because residents have access to beneficial networks and role models (Wilson 1997), there is sufficient income to support private sector services and sufficient influence to lobby for effective public services, and sufficient collective efficacy to uphold pro-social norms and regulate crime and anti-social behaviour (Pitts 2000, Power 1997, Sampson 1999). The government's urban policy encourages mixed-income communities and some local authorities are taking up that agenda with considerable vigour. In Newham, for example, the Council has proposed demolition of about 75% of the Council houses and flats in one working class neighbourhood in order to make way for a more sustainable community with about half the housing in private ownership and half socially rented. The proposals have generated strong resistance from existing residents, not just on the grounds that their homes are going to be demolished. They have pointed out the social disbenefits of dismantling established communities, for example the destruction of family and kinship networks that provide informal care for the elderly, unpaid childcare, supervision and control of young people and so on. They argue that this is a high price to pay for the supposed benefits of social mix, and question whether the problems of the neighbourhood could not be tackled without such radical changes to its socio-economic composition (Lupton 2003).

Attempts to measure quantitatively whether poor people really do better in socially mixed neighbourhoods would appear to be very valuable in this policy context. Case study research has demonstrated that mixing tenure does bring

some of the expected benefits, but not all. Atkinson and Kintrea (1998) found that mixing tenure did help to reduce stigma and therefore to build confidence in the area. However, it had little if any impact on social networks (at least in the short term), nor on facilities, because consumption activities of owners tended to take place elsewhere. In some cases there was resentment between households in the two tenures. A larger body of evidence on these issues would clearly be useful, but quantitative studies would need to be carefully constructed. Research based entirely on population composition measures might lead to the policy conclusion that the populations of poor neighbourhoods need to be dismantled by moving some of the poor. However, more complex designs incorporating measures of service delivery, stigma, and structural issues such as labour demand might reveal that the problems of poor neighbourhoods could be tackled by addressing the distribution of opportunity for their residents, rather than the composition of the population itself. Once again, methodological problems might stand in the way of the kind of research that is needed, and lead to myopic, and even potentially harmful, policy conclusions.

Conclusion

Two principal arguments have been made in this review. The first is that the design of quantitative research studies of area effects has to date been somewhat crude, mainly because of data constraints. Because it has been so difficult to operationalise the complex reality of neighbourhood within statistical models, the findings are unconvincing and sometimes inconsistent. It is hard to know whether apparently small area effects are genuine, or simply reflect difficulties in conceptualising and measuring neighbourhood. The second is that exaggerated claims have been made about the relevance of neighbourhood effects studies for area-based policy, based on emphasising only one of the rationales for area-based programmes, while neglecting others.

These arguments matter. Most importantly, it is crucial that area-based policies that have value for implementation and equity reasons are not thrown out because a mistaken belief that they are only worth doing if large area effects can be proven. Neighbourhood effects need to be accorded less significance in debates over the general principle of investment in area-based programmes. On the other hand, there is room for them to be have more influence in the design and determination of specific area-based interventions, and they are particularly relevant in the current debate about tenure mix and area sustainability. However, it is vital that important policy decisions are only made on the basis of research studies that are sophisticated enough in their design and data to accurately reflect the concept of neighbourhood. No research may be less

harmful than research that claims to measure neighbourhood effects but does not adequately do so.

The question is then whether the field can develop sufficiently to play this important policy role. At present, there is a danger that it will not, because an impasse may develop between qualitative and quantitative area researchers. Far from doing what Coleman envisaged and restoring social system explanations to their rightful place, crudely designed quantitative contributions have a tendency to reduce the concept of neighbourhood, so that it lacks what qualitative researchers might see as any useful meaning. Since the resultant findings are often that neighbourhood effects are small, qualitative researchers embroiled in disadvantaged areas may well respond by making exaggerated claims of neighbourhood effects based on studies that only consider poor neighbourhoods. This problem will ease as quantitative designs become more sophisticated, but also needs to be broken down by some active multi-disciplinary work, to ensure that the disciplines are really complementary, not just co-existing within the same broad area of work. For the field to develop, researchers from both of the traditions within area studies need to move on from a pre-occupation with identifying neighbourhood effects and consider the specific policy areas where knowledge of the causal mechanisms at work could really have an impact. This will require collaboration between qualitative researchers familiar with deprived neighbourhoods and with the policy agenda, and quantitative researchers ready to exploit increasing data availability with sensitive and sophisticated statistical models. It will be a challenging endeavour, with less grand policy implications and more genuine multi-disciplinary co-operation than is evident at present, but it may ultimately be a more fruitful way forward.

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