Determining the Structure of Neighbourhood Cohesion: Applying Synthetic Small Area Data in Sydney and Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

Social cohesion is an important determinant of functioning and healthy communities but its spatial distribution and relation to residential segregation within cities has not been adequately addressed due to the lack of small area data. A disconnect exists between the social capital and segregation literature. This paper presents how neighbourhood cohesion is spatially distributed in Sydney and Los Angeles using synthetic spatial microdata. The results indicate that Sydney has a relatively dense clustering of neighbourhood cohesion, whereas in Los Angeles it is more dispersed. In both cities, cohesion is highest in Anglo/white concentrations, and lowest in ethnically diverse areas. In Los Angeles, neighbourhood cohesion is significantly higher in African American concentrations than in Hispanic and Asian concentrations. Overall cohesion rises with the economic status in Los Angeles but not in Sydney.

Keywords: Cohesion, Los Angeles, Segregation, Small Area Estimates, Sydney, Synthetic Microdata

INTRODUCTION

Social cohesion and its benefits have been widely promoted by various researchers, politicians, OECD and World Bank with the argument that cohesion is part and parcel of well-functioning societies. Cohesion (though sometimes using different terms) is discussed in the context of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Portes, 1998; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Putnam, 2000). As Portes (1998) states, “consensus is growing in the literature that social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (Portes, 1998, p. 6). As part of social capital, social cohesion is usually described as a sense of belonging, mutual help, solidarity, trust, and reciprocity, occasionally also including a set of shared core values (Castles, 1999; Chan et al., 2006). Neighbourhood cohesion is a more localised form of social cohesion focusing...
specifically on people living within a certain residential area. It has been linked to positive effects for individuals and the community as a whole. The benefits associated with neighbourhood cohesion range from personal wellbeing and positive health outcomes (Baum et al., 2009; Ellaway et al., 2001; Putnam, 2000) to higher levels of safety and reduced crime rates (Hirschfeld & Bowers, 1997; Morenoff et al., 2001; Sampson et al., 1997) and to collective engagement (Wakefield et al., 2001).

In recent years, social cohesion has been embraced in the context of integration and segregation debates (Cantle, 2001, 2008; Castles, 1999; Cheong et al., 2007; Flint & Robinson, 2008; Kalra & Kapoor, 2009; Kitchen et al., 2006; Letki, 2008; Wetherell et al., 2007). Due to a disconnect between the social capital literature and the segregation literature, there seems to be some confusion in the public debate about the influence of ethnic diversity and residential segregation on cohesion. While some associate high ethnic diversity with low levels of trust and cohesion, others see ethnic enclaves as neighbourhoods or communities with high cohesion. One explanation is that the interpretation of the relationship between ethnic diversity and neighbourhood cohesion depends on the focus and scale of a study. Kalra and Kapoor (2009, p. 1409) state that “Conceptually there is a contradiction between the discourses of segregation and social capital. Where the segregation debate finds areas of high minority ethnic concentration a problem, the social capital debate targets ethically mixed areas”.

Another explanation for this confusion is that some studies compare places (i.e., cities and towns; e.g., Putnam, 2007; Uslaner, 2006), others undertake analyses within a city (e.g., Greif, 2009). Other reasons include how cohesion, ethnic diversity, and the degree of residential segregation are measured. Central to these issues is the need for data at the neighbourhood scale. Such data on social capital indicators like neighbourhood cohesion are not readily available for all small areas within a city, and as a result, few attempts have been made to analyse the spatial distribution of social capital. This is despite evidence suggesting that a “geography of social capital” may exist (Mohan & Mohan, 2002).

In order to overcome the lack of data, small area estimates have in this paper been derived from synthetic spatial microdata linking census with other survey microdata. Using these data, the paper examines the intraurban geography of neighbourhood cohesion for two global major immigrant receiving cities, Sydney, Australia, and Los Angeles, USA. While Los Angeles is an US-American metropolis that is characterised by high levels of segregation, it has also been described as “a prototype of our [the US-American] urban future” (Dear, 2002, p. 5) so that some claim that “understanding Los Angeles provides important insights into the future of the American metropolis” (Charles, 2006; Squires, 2007, p. 254). Sydney, on the other hand, has a less pronounced level of residential segregation and thereby provides a good contrast to Los Angeles and may be more representative for other Western (non-US) cities (Johnston et al., 2007).

In this study, we address the following questions: i) Is there a geographic pattern in the distribution of neighbourhood cohesion in Sydney and Los Angeles?; ii) How do areas with significantly high and low levels of neighbourhood cohesion differ from each other in terms of demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the population?; iii) How does neighbourhood cohesion vary with regards to the degree of ethnic separation and mixing and level of income in an area?

NEIGHBOURHOOD COHESION, ETHNIC DIVERSITY, AND RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION

The segregation literature views homogeneous ethnic enclaves as having high cohesion which benefits its members by providing social and financial support, protection, a sense of belonging, and job opportunities within the ethnic economy. However, living in ethnic enclaves can also limit job opportunities and incentives...
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