

Chapter 6

Area Deprivation

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The 1990 *Breadline Britain* survey included a small number of questions on area deprivation, such as whether respondents perceived their area to be dirty and unpleasant, whether it lacked pleasant and open spaces, and whether nearby houses were boarded up. These questions were subsequently analysed in the contexts of local services (Bramley, 1997) and mental health (Payne, 1997).

The importance of area deprivation has recently received heightened political emphasis with the setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), which has emphasised the need to combat social exclusion on Britain's 'worst housing estates'. The SEU prioritises the need to resolve the problems of poor housing conditions, crime, disorder, as well as unemployment, community breakdown, poor health, educational underachievement and inadequate public transport and local services in deprived neighbourhoods (SEU, 1998).

The section on area deprivation will be expanded in the new Survey and efforts have been made to ensure greater compatibility with questions from other surveys. This task has been complicated by the fact that there exist two contrasting set of literatures: i) the urban/housing literature and ii) the criminological/victimological literature.

Housing surveys (e.g. the English House Condition Survey, the Survey of English Housing) have examined area deprivation by asking respondents about the condition of the neighbourhood and the environment. More recent sweeps of housing surveys have also examined problems arising directly from neighbours. For example, the Survey of English Housing (1995/96) examined a whole range of problems experienced by householders with their neighbours: e.g. noise, problems with cars, dogs, children, vandalism, racial attacks, drug dealing, violence, verbal abuse and disputes relating to gardens and boundaries.

In contrast, the criminological/victimological literature comments on the characteristics of the area in terms of 'incivilities' (e.g. racist attacks, drunks and tramps) and the effects that these 'incivilities' may have on fear of crime and indeed on crime itself. Much of the thinking on incivilities stems from the 'broken windows' thesis which was developed in the United States by Wilson and Kelling (1982) and which has the support of the present Home Secretary, Jack Straw. A high level of incivilities in an area is believed to influence levels of fear amongst residents, which can lead to avoidance behaviour (e.g. avoid going out at night, avoid walking down certain roads and avoid walking past certain types of people). Avoidance behaviour is considered to exacerbate crime in an area because property and people are left unguarded. Moreover, an area with a high level of incivilities indicates a lack of social cohesion and community involvement. Furthermore, it is this kind of thinking which has contributed to the recent 'zero tolerance' policing policies and practices in Kings Cross and other parts of the UK, such as Middlesborough (Fooks and Pantazis, forthcoming).

There is an additional issue at stake, when attempting harmonisation with other surveys, that is relevant to the consideration of area characteristics. Even if we are able to agree on a list of indicators to measure area deprivation or area incivilities (e.g. noise, graffiti), there are at least two ways in which we may ask respondents about them. Most surveys (e.g. the Survey of English Housing, the British Crime Survey) ask respondents how much of a problem are certain incidents, situations or people in their area. For example, respondents in the British Crime Survey are asked the following question: *Can you tell me how much of a problem are 'racist attacks' in your area?*

This type of questioning attempts to assess the extent to which the respondents perceive certain incidents (e.g. racial attacks) as a problem in their area. It is less concerned with ascertaining the frequency of racial attacks in the respondent's area. There exist other surveys (e.g. the British Social Attitudes Survey) that are more interested in establishing frequency. For instance, respondents are asked how common are certain types of people or incidents in their area. The new Survey will incorporate both methods. Respondents will be asked about their perceptions of certain situations (e.g. poor street lighting, lack of open public spaces) and the frequency of types of behaviour (e.g. begging) and types of incidents (e.g. racist attacks).

References

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