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Residents of more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods actually reported higher levels of social cohesion

Blog Admin

*Debates over policy relating to immigration and ethnic diversity in the UK are highly charged and ideological. Many argue that immigration harms social cohesion because it increases the level of ethnic and racial diversity in local communities, which serves in turn to drive down trust and erode norms of reciprocity and cooperation. In contrast to the vast majority of existing investigations, **Patrick Sturgis, Ian Brunton-Smith, Jouni Kuha and Jonathan Jackson** found that residents of more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods actually reported higher levels of community cohesion than those who lived in less diverse areas, once levels of economic deprivation and segregation were controlled for.*

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The social and economic consequences of mass immigration have risen in prominence in recent years. For some, immigration is essential for maintaining economic competitiveness and supporting a vibrant, progressive and culturally dynamic society. For others, immigration is seen as a threat to the economic opportunities and living standards of the indigenous population, as well as being damaging to the social fabric of local areas.

Influential commentators from both the left and right [have argued](#) that immigration harms social cohesion because it increases the level of ethnic and racial diversity in local communities, which serves in turn to drive down trust and erode norms of reciprocity and cooperation. A [good deal of evidence has now been marshalled](#) in support of this claim, with a large number of studies in a range of different contexts finding a negative association between the ethnic diversity of a neighbourhood and the level of trust expressed by individual residents.

Given the highly charged and ideological nature of debates over policy relating to immigration and ethnic diversity, it is essential that the evidence base is as robust as possible and not overly reliant on US-based research which may not generalise to the very different historical context of ethnic composition of neighbourhoods in the UK. [Recent research](#) – undertaken by colleagues at the University of Southampton ([NCRM Hub](#)), the LSE and the University of Surrey – has provided new insights into this question. If living in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood causes people to distrust and avoid one another, then we should be certain to find evidence of the phenomenon in London – a city which the 2011 census showed has a justifiable claim to being the most ethnically diverse conurbation on the planet.



*Residents of more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods actually reported higher levels of community cohesion
(Credit: Feral78)*

Data for our analysis were drawn from the [Metropolitan Police Public Attitude Survey](#), which covers a range of topics including [police legitimacy](#), experience of crime, [contact with the police](#), and the social cohesion and disorder in one's local neighbourhood. After linking the survey data to information from the census and other sources about the ethnic, social and economic composition of neighbourhoods, we used multi-level models to estimate the conditional association between ethnic diversity at the neighbourhood level and

individual assessments of social cohesion.

A [common limitation](#) of much existing neighbourhood effects research is the reliance on spatial units that do not map well on to peoples' lived experience of local neighbourhoods. Employing spatial units which are a reasonable approximation to subjective characterisations of 'neighbourhood' is important because the mechanisms which are proposed to underlie ethnic diversity's effect on cohesion and trust are social-psychological in nature. Yet, it is difficult to know *a priori* exactly what the appropriate spatial scale might be for any particular outcome or mechanism.

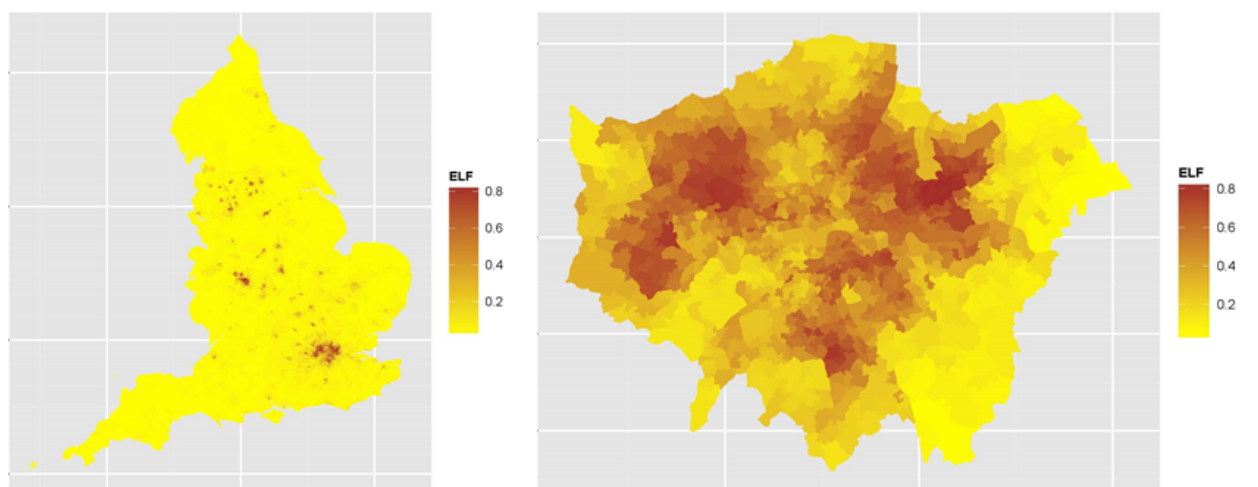
We used two different definitions of neighbourhood boundary, with the first smaller units nested within the second, larger ones. For the lower level neighbourhood boundary, we used Lower layer Super Output Areas (LSOA). LSOA is the lowest level of the neighbourhood statistics geography produced to disseminate the 2001 UK census (with 4,759 in Greater London). LSOAs are agglomerated hierarchically to form the second, larger, neighbourhood areal unit, referred to as Middle Super Output Areas (MSOA). MSOA contain between seven and nine LSOA and comprise, on average, 5000 households.

To measure ethnic segregation within neighbourhoods, we used Theil's multigroup entropy index. This compares the ethnic composition of an areal unit to the ethnic composition of the areal sub-units of which it is comprised, with larger differences representing more segregated areas. A methodological innovation of the study was to include a measure of ethnic segregation within neighbourhoods, alongside a standard index of neighbourhood ethnic diversity. Including a measure of segregation alongside diversity is important because a key moderator of the relationship between ethnic diversity and trust is the level of meaningful social contact between groups. Contact [has been shown](#) to substantially reduce prejudice between ethnic groups.

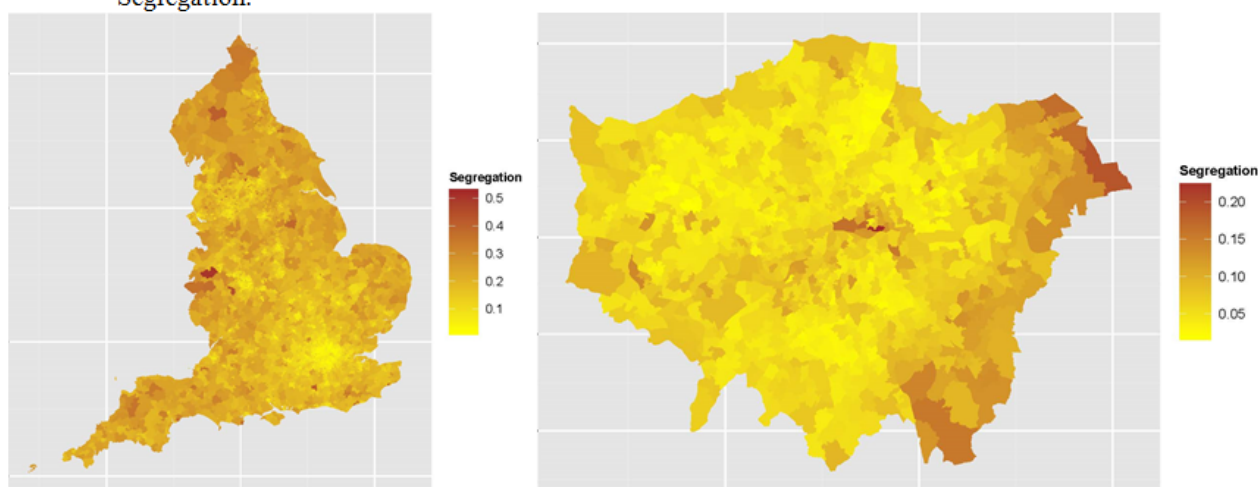
It can be seen that there is much variation in both diversity and segregation among areas in London, and that segregation tends to be highest where diversity is low. Compared to London, most of the rest of England has much lower levels of diversity and higher levels of segregation (the latter to a large extent because the measure of segregation almost inevitably obtains a high value at very small values of diversity).

Figure 1: *Maps of ethnic diversity (upper row; measured by the Herfindahl concentration index, labelled "ELF") and ethnic segregation (lower row; measured by the Multigroup entropy index) in small areas (Middle Super Output Areas) in England (on the left) and in London (on the right).*

Diversity:



Segregation:



In contrast to the vast majority of existing investigations, we found that residents of more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods actually reported higher levels of community cohesion than those who lived in less diverse areas, once levels of economic deprivation and segregation were controlled for. Those in more segregated neighbourhoods, by contrast, tended to feel their areas were less socially cohesive. An additional insight of the study was to show that these relationships are strongly affected by age. For older Londoners, neighbourhood ethnic diversity is associated with lower ratings of social cohesion, while the pattern is reversed in younger cohorts. This 'interaction' effect [supports the idea](#) that the way individuals evaluate and respond to ethnic diversity is dependent on their experiences of different ethnic groups during their formative years.

While older Londoners knew a city in their childhoods that was predominantly white, younger cohorts have grown up in and are therefore more comfortable with, a multi-ethnic neighbourhood environment. If the experience of those in one of the world's most diverse city tells us something important for public policy, it is that high levels of ethnic diversity within a neighbourhood need not result in low levels of social cohesion.

Ethnic diversity seems not, in and of itself, to drive down community cohesion and trust. In fact, in the highly diverse neighbourhoods that characterise modern London, the opposite appears to be the case, once adequate account is taken of the spatial distribution of immigrant groups within neighbourhoods and the degree of social and economic deprivation experienced by residents.

One might, it must be conceded, object to the conclusions we have drawn here on the very grounds with which we have sought to justify them; that London's unique immigrant and ethnic makeup renders it *sui generis* and, therefore, of limited utility in understanding how the quantity and distribution of immigrant

groups within neighbourhoods will affect community relations in other contexts. While the argument that London's very exceptionalism makes it of questionable generality carries some weight, it also serves to foreground the coincident imperative: that, the sociologist's task should not be to determine the effect that ethnic diversity has on community life in some universal sense, but to shed light on the inevitably contingent conditions which give rise to positive and negative outcomes in different contexts.

Ethnic diversity, segregation and the social cohesion of neighbourhoods in London, by Sturgis, P. Brunton-Smith, I. Kuha, J. and Jackson, J. is published in [Ethnic and Racial Studies](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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2 Responses to Residents of more ethnically diverse neighbourhoods actually reported higher

levels of social cohesion



Adam Gray says:

November 26, 2013 at 11:25 am

Looking just at the London maps, it is noticeable that the areas you characterise as “ethnically diverse” could, in fact, also be described as areas with already low, and rapidly declining proportions of white English residents. In fact, viewed from a MOSAIC perspective, the classification of the sort of white residents who live in these areas (classifications such as “bohemian melting pot” for example!) tend to be left-leaning, professional, young types who actively opt to live in diverse communities.

Does that matter? Yes, because while there will be harmony between the white British minority and the other ethnic minorities that characterise these diverse communities, that same harmony cannot necessarily be ascribed to white British residents who are “trapped” in these communities for whatever reason (public housing tenancy and an inability to escape; an identity with the area they regard as having changed for the worse but still unwilling to leave; negative equity – whatever).

The areas of highest “diversity” also tend to have a dominant ethnic origin: in Southall, Hounslow, Harrow and Wembley Hindu and Sikh; in north and east London Pakistani Muslim; in Tower Hamlets Bangladeshi Muslim; in South Central London and Tottenham African and Caribbean. Of course there are other ethnicities present (the Turkish community in Haringey and the Poles in Hammersmith, Fulham and Acton, for example) I wonder how you measure diversity, therefore: is it a mix of different backgrounds or simply the presence of people of different ethnicity, irrespective of how many different cultures exist?

In which case, this becomes less of a case study of integration, and more one of how diverse ethnic minority communities interact well together. But it then does not actually show quite the harmony you suggest, because census figures show that white flight out of London is not diminishing just as ethnic minority flight from central London to the suburbs of London is transforming the social and political demographics of the outer London boroughs.

To take one specific example: Roehampton ward in LB Wandsworth. The 2013 census showed that in the ten years the white UK population of the ward diminished by 22%, which is getting on for 3,000 people in real numbers. Hardly an insignificant number. Does that show a community happily integrating, or does it show a community becoming more diverse by default because the dominant ethnic group is fleeing? You would presumably argue the former. I am sceptical that you would be correct.

[Reply](#)



Jolie says:

December 2, 2013 at 1:35 pm

Slightly off-topic: I'm a recent graduate of a MSc in LSE's Gender Institute and while studying I've been working part-time as a field researcher/interviewer for the Metropolitan Police Public Attitude Survey in Hackney and Islington. I'm genuinely happy someone took the data for a spin in ways I've been constantly thinking about 😊

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