



Spatial Economics Research Centre

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Changing UK

The BBC are focusing on [geographical segregation](#). Lots of pretty maps show how areas of the UK differ in terms of health, wealth, ethnic composition political engagement etc. You can even see how the geography of "loneliness" is changing. On a wide number of indicators areas of the UK are becoming increasingly different. The tone of the coverage suggests that this is all bad news. Is it?

According to the maps, areas in the south seem to generate higher incomes than areas in the north. Surely that's bad? But it turns out that the south has also seen the largest population growth. So population is growing fastest in areas that offer the best economic opportunities. In terms of individuals, doesn't that sound like a rather good thing?

Let's take another example. It would take 4,289,377 people moving home to make the geographical distribution of age even across the country. [But are unequal age distributions a bad thing?](#) There are clearly rather large benefits to having families with children spatially concentrated in one area, while young workers live elsewhere (the former want good schools, the latter good night clubs and spatially separating schools and night clubs is generally good not bad).

What about "loneliness"? You are loneliest if you are non-married, live in a 1 person household, have moved within the last year and are renting private. Let's set aside the issue of what you are actually capturing here and imagine that you fit that category. Are you better or worse off living close to people who also fit in that category? There seem to be good arguments why spatial concentration might on balance be a good thing (imagine for example that you were hoping to change your non-married status - isn't that easier to do when surrounded by other non-married people).

These maps are a nice description of what is happening in different areas. But they are not an analysis of the benefits and costs of the resulting segregation. Because people are different, places will tend to be different. Whether this is good or bad depends on whether the composition of a place actually has any direct impact on the well being of individuals who live in that place. These maps can't answer this question, so they tell us something about who is living where, but not whether this matters.

Posted by [Prof Henry G. Overman](#) on [Wednesday, December 03, 2008](#)

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