

# Neighborhoods and Community

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## Glossary

**Broken Windows** A theory developed within criminology that environmental incivilities will result in further crimes and the decline of a neighborhood.

**Collective Efficacy** The combined capacity of groups of individuals to influence their local environment or social circumstances.

**Communitarianism** A form of social theory and political organization based on membership of, and engagement within, a community.

**Ecological Fallacy** The fallacy of making inferences about individuals from aggregated data.

**Residualization** The increasing concentration of deprived and vulnerable populations within a neighborhood.

**Social Capital** Forms of collective networks and reciprocal relationships that bring social benefits to a group of individuals.

**Spatial Mismatch** Spatial barriers of access, such as poor transport connections that prevent individuals from taking up certain employment opportunities.

**Tipping Point** A theory that once a particular population forms a certain proportion of residents in a neighborhood, rapid and significant change will then occur in the neighborhood.

**Underclass Theory** A theory that certain deprived populations are becoming increasingly socially and culturally isolated from 'mainstream' society.

## Introduction

Neighborhood and community are two of the most frequently used terms in urban geography. They are multidimensional forms of human organization with no universally agreed definition to describe them. Neighborhoods and community are synonymous with urban settlements. Although neighborhood and community are not interchangeable, and indeed one may exist without the other, it is the socio-spatial interaction of neighborhood and community that has been the focus of urban geography, dating back to Mayhew's study of London's rookeries in the nineteenth century and the Chicago School's exploration of neighborhood formation in the 1920s. It is primarily through neighborhoods that urban spaces become identified as urban places, with their own histories, trajectories, and meanings for residents.

If the city is conceptualized as a form of community or communities existing within urban space, then neighborhoods are the smallest territorial scale at which the communal processes of urban life are usually organized and studied in urban geography. In this conceptualization, neighborhoods may be regarded as the blocks upon which the economic, social, political, and cultural elements of the city are built. Neighborhoods and community have become increasingly prominent in both urban geography and urban policy, based on an understanding that neighborhoods serve crucial functions within urban systems and are in turn affected by wider changes in urban and global forces. Contemporary studies within urban geography suggest that neighborhoods and communities, and our understanding of what these mean, are being transformed at an unprecedented scale and pace.

## Defining Neighborhoods and Community

Neighborhoods comprise the smallest unit of urban social territory and political organization. There is no universally accepted definition within urban geography of what constitutes an urban neighborhood. The smallest unit of a neighborhood is typically defined as an area of up to 10 min walk from one's home. A neighborhood may be enclosed by physical boundaries, including railway lines, major roads, and fences. It may also comprise residential properties of a similar built form or housing tenure. Residents of a neighborhood may share similar characteristics, including ethnicity, occupation, and income, which come to define the identity of the neighborhood. Neighborhoods are also demarcated by a range of agencies and organizations for the purposes of urban administration, service delivery, and governance. Within neighborhoods, there are often subterritories of particular streets, and neighborhoods are also situated within wider localities, often referred to as wards or districts, which in turn are located within larger settlements and regions. Neighborhoods are multidimensional forms of urban organization, comprising a series of spatially based attributes and processes relating to the built environment, the economic, social, and cultural characteristics of the population residing within them, the interactions between residents and the forms of employment, services, and facilities located within neighborhoods, and how these are utilized.

Community is an equally complex and contested term. Community relates to a form of social organization based

upon some commonality between individuals, which results in them being defined as members of such a community and simultaneously demarcates others who are not members of the community. Membership of a community is differentiated from membership of a family grouping or legally defined citizenship of a nation state and is therefore regarded as a separate form of social identity with related social processes. Most individuals are members of diverse and overlapping communities. Communities need not be primarily spatially based. They can relate to religious affiliation (as in the global Umma of Islam), political beliefs, sexual orientation, occupation, and cultural and leisure interests. The growth of global communication technology has been particularly important in establishing 'online' communities which reduce the centrality of space to community identity. However, many communities are linked to defined spaces and places at a range of spatial scales, including the international (e.g., the European Union) and nation states. The interaction of place and community at the local level has received particular attention among urban geographers and urban governments, leading often to a conflation of neighborhood and community and a focus upon the combination of social and spatial dynamics within neighborhoods. The extent to which individuals identify with communities and neighborhoods varies, as does the importance of neighborhoods and communities for individuals' lives. It is therefore important to avoid the ecological fallacy of equating an individual's residence with his/her personal attributes or behaviors.

### **The Functions of Neighborhoods and Communities**

Neighborhoods serve a number of functions. Their predominant function is as a site of residence and home location for individuals and families. This is often, but not necessarily, linked to individual psychosocial processes of belonging, identity, security, and familiarity. The emergence of neighborhoods in the historical growth of urban areas was often linked to their role as the sites of initial residence for new populations. The migration of rural populations to cities due to industrialization characterized the development of urban neighborhoods in the developed world in the nineteenth and twentieth century and characterizes the rapid urban growth of developing nations into the twenty first century. The close proximity of home to work was a feature of the development of human settlements which continued through the Industrial Revolution. However, in the post World War II era, advances in transport and communication technologies and changing economic activities reduced the link between work and residential neighborhood, epitomized in the growth of commuting. This was often combined by deliberate urban

planning policies that sought to separate residential neighborhoods from industrial and commercial zones in cities. However, further evolution of the economy and information technology and concerns about environmental sustainability may result in a renewed proximity between neighborhood and place of employment.

Neighborhoods also serve a primary function in housing markets and housing policies. They serve as a sorting mechanism that links households to employment opportunities, educational facilities, available health services, or ethnic and cultural support mechanisms. The residential choice of neighborhood is heavily mediated by house prices and income, and the composition of most neighborhoods therefore reflects differential economic and social status. Urban geography research suggests that the neighborhood is equally, or even more, important than the characteristics of individual properties in driving residential location decisions. The provision of subsidized, affordable housing by public or quasi public agencies also results in the development of new neighborhoods, for example, the slum clearances and construction of large scale periphery housing estates, which were a dominant feature of urban planning in many cities during the twentieth century.

Neighborhoods also serve as sites of consumption and civic engagement. They provide some local retail and commercial services, although these have often reduced due to the growth of edge of town retail parks. Neighborhoods may also provide specific facilities linked to ethnic, cultural, or religious affiliations. They provide sites of leisure and recreation, including public spaces, and are the locations where public services such as policing, environmental cleansing, and education are delivered. In addition to organizational sites for public service delivery and management, neighborhoods also serve a civic and political function as the arena for engagement between urban residents and governance structures and the lowest tier of political representation. The recent trend in many cities for decentralized and devolved urban administration has resulted in both neighborhood management and neighborhood forums for decision making gaining increasing prominence. The functions that a neighborhood serves vary between individuals and also change over the life course, for example, the attributes required from a neighborhood by a young, single person is likely to be different to those required by a household with children. The extent to which an individual is reliant on the neighborhood to provide his/her employment, friendship networks, and access to services and facilities is also a function of economic status, so that a neighborhood of residence and the attributes contained within it will matter more to some individuals.

Neighborhoods are also arenas for socialization, including family and friendship networks, and also provide sites of social solidarity and protection. The concept of

neighboring refers to social interaction between non family members sharing a spatial proximity, while the concept of community is differentiated from the relationship between citizen and state. As such, neighboring and community are regarded as organic processes developing and occurring within neighborhoods. The acts of neighboring range from the exchange of pleasantries in the street to reciprocal favors, such as guarding properties or childcare. Community, strongly influenced by the concept of communitarianism, denotes both a membership of a social body and the social processes that arise from this membership. In addition to community serving as a site of identity and belonging within the arena of the neighborhood, the processes of community are envisaged as fostering social solidarity and providing the motivations and means for collective endeavor, including political engagement. This is based on a common attachment to a neighborhood (and its future) and a shared sense of purpose among its residents that over rides other social divisions and allegiances to other forms of community. However, the work of urban geographers, from Harvey Warren Zorbaugh in the 1920s and David Ley in the 1970s through to contemporary studies, has identified the complexities and disunities in everyday behavior and social interactions within neighborhoods. Despite this, the promotion of community, enacted spatially through neighborhoods, has been a prominent pillar of contemporary urban policy in many nations.

## **Neighborhood and Community Careers**

Urban geographers have identified that neighborhoods and communities, like individuals, have careers. That is, neighborhoods evolve over time, both internally and in relation to other neighborhoods in an urban area. These careers can result in changes in the function of neighborhoods, their populations, and their built environment. The study of neighborhood careers has a history dating back to the Chicago School's identification of zones of transition through which neighborhoods became the site of new populations and economic activities and subsequently evolved to serve new functions in the urban system, such as the 'frontier outpost' role of Black inner city neighborhoods in the United States. A contemporary manifestation of neighborhood careers, which has been subject to considerable attention in urban geography, is the processes of gentrification occurring in many cities of the world, whereby previously working class and/or ethnic minority inner city neighborhoods are being transformed by new populations, businesses, services, and facilities. Gentrification and regeneration may represent the 'rise' of a neighborhood, associated with improvements in the physical environment, falling crime rates, higher educational attainment, rising house prices,

improved public services, and an enhanced reputation of the neighborhood, and its inhabitants, in the wider urban area. Conversely, urban geographers have also studied neighborhoods that decline, leading to social disorganization, the abandonment and demolition of properties, rising crime levels, the withdrawal of commercial and public services, and a stigmatization of the neighborhood and its inhabitants. A contemporary example of this process is what is usually termed the residualization of public housing estates in many countries, resulting in a growing concentration of vulnerable and deprived residents. Specific, and contested, concepts such as broken windows and population tipping point theories have been developed to describe the micro processes within neighborhoods that lead to a spiral of economic, social, and physical decline.

The role of community in neighborhood careers is uncertain. A strong community, stable population, and long term residency are regarded as signifiers of successful neighborhoods, while rapid population turnover is often a signifier of a distressed neighborhood. However, collective coping mechanisms among residents are also a feature of many declining neighborhoods. Changes in neighborhoods are linked to wider economic and societal shifts. For example, the long term evolution of some neighborhoods in the northern United States was linked to economic developments in both the north and south of the country, the resultant migration of the Black population to inner urban areas and the subsequent 'white flight' to the suburbs and then further economic and social restructuring which increasingly disadvantaged inner city neighborhoods. The link between neighborhood and employment opportunities is also emphasized in spatial mismatch economic theories that suggest residents in some deprived neighborhoods are unable to access new employment opportunities in urban areas due to their physical isolation and the poor or expensive transport infrastructure serving these neighborhoods.

One of the challenges facing urban planners is the extent to which policy should focus on changing the fortunes of neighborhoods as static places or the mobile populations who reside within them, linked to the functions that particular neighborhoods serve. For example, some neighborhoods have retained long established ethnic populations and identities, including many Jewish communities. Other neighborhoods experience shifts in their population and identity, for example, the historic Irish and Italian, and more recently Korean and Hispanic neighborhoods of New York. This also applies to the economic, housing tenure, and life course function of neighborhoods. Neighborhoods dominated by public or private rented housing may remain problematic as sites of low income and social problems, but may be regarded as necessary transitory locations for individuals prior to them moving to other neighborhoods and housing

tenures. The emphasis on spatially targeted neighborhood regeneration and area based initiatives in urban policy also faces this dilemma, with the evidence suggesting that many of the improvements resulting from interventions benefit individuals who then leave a deprived neighborhood to be replaced by new vulnerable or deprived households, resulting in little overall change in the circumstances of the neighborhood. Some urban renewal programs, such as the Hope VI and Moving to Opportunity programs in the United States, are explicitly based on relocating households to more affluent neighborhoods and communities in order to further their life opportunities.

## **Neighborhood and Community Effects**

The concept of neighborhood effects is influential in contemporary urban geography and urban policy. Neighborhood effects describe the advantages or disadvantages that a place of residence has on the life circumstances and opportunities of an individual. Neighborhood effects act as a related but independent variable to individual characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and social class. Neighborhood effects have therefore been identified as explaining the differential trajectories of neighborhoods with initially similar socioeconomic and demographic population profiles.

The prominence given to neighborhood effects reflects both the cultural and spatial turns in human geography. Neighborhood and community and the social and cultural processes occurring within them have become more important as the concept of poverty has broadened from material deprivation to a focus on a wider social exclusion that includes both individual and collective spatially based dimensions. The 1990s saw a reemergence of the 1960s 'rediscovery' of poverty and a focus within urban geography upon cultures of neighborhood poverty. The school of underclass theorists claimed the existence of specific forms of collective attitudes and behaviors that resulted in the sociospatial distancing of deprived communities from the rest of their societies. While urban geographers disputed the extent to which such cultures were caused by internal neighborhood processes or were the result of wider economic and social restructuring, underclass related theories have been influential within urban policy programs aimed at reversing neighborhood decline.

The growing concentration of poverty within particular urban neighborhoods and the concentration of effects that are conceptualized as arising from this process have led many urban policy regimes to attempt to increase the levels of social mix within neighborhoods, including providing a range of housing tenures, income levels, household types, and ethnic diversity. However,

the international research evidence suggests that the resultant spatial proximity does not subsequently lead to improved social interaction between social classes or facilitate a growing sense of community based around a collective neighborhood identity.

## **Social Capital and Collective Efficacy**

Two concepts linked to neighborhoods and community have recently been influential in urban geography and urban policy making: social capital and collective efficacy. Social capital refers to the forms of trust, reciprocity, and collective capacity that exist between networks of individuals and neighborhood based organizations. As with other forms of capital, social capital is a resource which communities may draw upon to further opportunities and services within neighborhoods. Social capital may operate informally between neighbors in order to strengthen social processes and a sense of belonging or be used by local communities to influence economic and political decision making to achieve improvements within neighborhoods. Social capital has been promoted as a neighborhood and community based mechanism for complementing economic and social regeneration in deprived neighborhoods and for revitalizing civic engagement. However, social capital is also theorized as a mechanism for ensuring the status of more affluent and elite neighborhoods. There is an important distinction between social capital that enables residents to cope in deprived neighborhoods, for example, exchanging favors or lending each other small amounts of money, and social capital that enables residents and neighborhoods to advance their circumstances by enhancing employment and educational opportunities or improving the quality of public services within neighborhoods.

Collective efficacy develops social capital theory by focusing on the outcomes, rather than the presence, of collective processes or shared norms and values within neighborhoods. Primarily developed in criminology, it has been applied within urban geography to studies of how communities use mechanisms of formal and informal social control to regulate behavior and the use of public space within neighborhoods. These studies have demonstrated that levels of collective efficacy vary significantly between neighborhoods, and, as with the neighborhood effects literature, suggest that collective efficacy is not related straightforwardly to the income, ethnicity, or age of residents. The importance of social capital and collective efficacy theories lies in their identification of the significance of the sociospatial interaction of communal processes within urban neighborhoods. While social capital and collective efficacy remain influential in urban policy and planning, they have been criticized by some urban geographers for failing to capture the complexities

and divisions that exist within communities and that play out at the scale of the neighborhood.

### **Neighborhoods and Urban Segregation**

Neighborhoods are a physical and spatial manifestation of the wider economic and social forces acting upon them. Although there are contemporary concerns that urban neighborhoods are becoming increasingly socially segregated along community fault lines, it is important to note that cities, including classical period Rome, have always had neighborhoods that have been socially and spatially segregated on the lines of social status, income, and ethnicity. Indeed, urban geographers have long identified that the delimitation of boundaries and territoriality are inherent features of the social construction of neighborhood. However, international urban geography research evidence does suggest that many neighborhoods are becoming more internally homogeneous, while concentrations of wealth and poverty are becoming more pronounced, thereby increasing the neighborhood effects on life chances. Two other contemporary developments in neighborhood formation have also received much academic attention in relation to urban segregation.

First, neighborhoods are becoming less physically as well as socially permeable. This is symbolized in the growth of gated communities which prevent nonresidents entering neighborhoods and which challenges the traditional urban concepts of public space, fluidity, and universally accessible, if differentiated neighborhoods. Gated developments also reflect the growth of community governance through which local neighborhoods seek to govern themselves, insulate their residents from risk, and consume private rather than public services. In addition to changing the traditional built form and sociospatial processes or urban areas, these developments also challenge the role of neighborhoods and local communities as the first tier of political and civic engagement that links residents to the wider municipality.

Second, there are concerns, particularly in Western Europe, that neighborhoods are becoming increasingly segregated along ethno religious lines, with a resultant undermining of national belonging and social cohesion. In the UK, the concept of parallel lives denotes the spatial and social isolation between neighborhoods comprising different ethnic groups, in which strong internal community ties are premised on the exclusion of outsiders. The work of urban geographers such as Fred Boal illustrates that ethnic and religious segregation within neighborhoods is not a contemporary development and that differentiation of residence is influenced by population change and migration and linked to wider notions of community identity, belonging, and interaction.

### **Changing Forms of Neighborhoods and Communities**

Urban geographers have identified the scale of changes occurring in urban localities across the globe and manifested most visibly at the neighborhood level. Neighborhoods have always formed and reformed, but the contemporary pace of change is greater than its historical precedents. Neighborhoods are more susceptible to rapid local economic restructuring and to increasing population flows within and between nation states. While neighborhoods and communities are posited as providing important anchors for social identity, familiarity, and belonging, the sociospatial processes occurring within them mean that traditional certainties about neighbors and access to housing and employment are diminishing. As individuals become more mobile and are required to become more flexible and responsive, it is likely that many will live in more neighborhoods during their life course than previous generations. However, mobility and choice are far from universal, and neighborhoods in the developed and developing world are sites of exclusion and disadvantage as well as places of opportunity. Just as cities increasingly compete in a global economy, neighborhoods, including those within the same city, are also in competition for forms of capital, making the trajectories of individual neighborhoods uncertain.

The reductions in space and time manifested in processes of globalization are also evident in how neighborhoods are identified and defined, for example, through online residential search sites, while information technology also creates new opportunities for the formation of communities. However, these technologies are still linked to the local sociospatial manifestation of forces that define what a neighborhood is. Economic development, population change, and technological advances dominated the historic formation and evolution of neighborhoods and local communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Environmental sustainability may well prove to be an equally important factor for neighborhoods and communities in the future.

*See also:* Chicago School; Ecological Fallacy; Gentrification; Governance, Urban; Planning, Urban; Public Spaces, Urban; Regeneration to Renaissance; Segregation, Urban; Urban Policy.

### **Further Reading**

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## Relevant Websites

- <http://www.neighbourhoodcentre.org.uk>  
ESRC Centre for Neighbourhood Research.
- <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu>  
Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, Inter University Consortium for Political and Social Research.