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Network sampling of social divisions in a rural Inuit community

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This paper describes results from a network survey of Nain – a predominantly Inuit community of ~1200 people located on the northern coast of Labrador. As part of a larger social network research project, we used peer-referral sampling to recruit 330 residents for interviews about food sharing, housing, public health and community traditions. The peer-referral chains were analysed statistically to determine the presence and absence of social divisions in the community. The results of these analyses show that ethnic identification, relocation status and household income were the most significant social divisions in the community, while gender, education level and employment status show little or no effect on patterns of between-group interconnection. We argue that statistical patterns in the presence (and absence) of intergroup links offer novel ways to examine the interrelationship between recent economic development and the historical disruptions caused by Inuit community relocations in the 1950s.

Keywords: Inuit; Labrador; respondent driven sampling; social network analysis; inequality; sampling

While social boundaries (such as social class, gender, ethnic identity) are widely recognised possibilities within all communities, it is often difficult to demonstrate in any rigorous way the extent to which one or another potential division applies in a particular location, or how different sorts of social division interact with each other, or with unique historical events. Measuring unequal income is easy, for example, but measuring the effect of differences in income on patterns of individual connectedness and group cohesiveness is much more difficult. The same holds true for other more amorphous means of division, such as ethnic identity, where categories are more open to individual interpretation and the resulting relationships have, in the past, been nearly impossible to quantify.

This paper describes methods used to discover the presence/absence of social boundaries formed around income, gender, age, ethnic identity, place of birth, employment status and other individual social characteristics in Nain – a predominantly Inuit community on the north coast of Labrador, Canada – as these issues interact with the effects of past community relocation policies on the Labrador coast.

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