Are communities becoming more segregated? Does it matter?

Positive health benefits

Researchers Rebecca Steinbach, Chris Grundy and Calum Davy at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine recently produced a fascinating map of London, based on the 2011 census, which plotted the settlement of different ethnic groups in the capital (see Figure 1). The researchers argued that the map could be especially useful for analysing health issues. For example, some research, particularly around mental health, has suggested there exists a ‘group density’ effect on health, where ethnic minorities living in an area with a higher proportion of people from a similar ethnic group enjoy better health than those who live in areas with a lower proportion. So, ethnic self-segregation in the UK could have some positive health outcomes.

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Social segregation

Cantle’s report tells us where different ethnic communities live, but not how they interact. The Social Integration Commission (SIC) recently addressed this question in a 2015 report called How Integrated is Modern Britain? The commission hired Ipsos MORI to conduct a survey of 4,269 British people aged between 13 and 80 years of age, asking about interactions with people from other ethnic groups. It then tried to measure their social integration.

For example, if a white respondent lives in an area where 40% of people are from non-white ethnic groups, if there was no social segregation one would expect 40% of their interactions to be with non-whites. If this figure turned out to be 30%, then they had 25% fewer interactions (a score of -25%) with people of a different ethnicity than one would expect if ethnicity was irrelevant.

So, what did they find? Well, as shown in Figure 3, apart from the ‘Mixed’ ethnic group, all ethnic groups have around 40% to 50% fewer social interactions with others than would occur if there was no social segregation.

The SIC report also found that young people under 17 years old actually have fewer interactions with other ethnic groups than people aged 18 to 34. This raises questions around ethnic difference in UK schools. However, those aged 18 to 34 are the most ethnically integrated age group. This age group are more likely to attend further and higher educational institutions, and are highly mobile.

So, should we simply expect and accept that people from different ethnic backgrounds will seek out people like themselves to live among and socialise with? Or, without intervention, are we heading for problems as a segregated and divided society?

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