PHOTOESSAY

Visualizing sense of community and social fragmentation

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How do you capture the sense of community of an area? And why is sense of community important? The community and the environment where an individual lives can have a significant impact on the individual’s health and well-being. In particular, recent research has shown that the level of ‘social fragmentation’ in an area—weak of social connections—is strongly correlated with suicide rates,1,2 echoing Durkheim’s classic sociological work on suicide and social integration over a century ago.3 The built environment in which a person lives is also linked to health, and recent work has developed visual (‘broken windows’) indices for areas and related them to health outcomes.4,5 The level of deprivation in an area is also a factor considered in these area-based studies.

For a small-scale study as part of a medical degree special study component, a visual index of socioeconomic status was modified specifically for Bristol—an urban area in the south-west of England—including items such as graffiti and broken windows as well as looking at standard building components such as the condition of front entrances, garages, and also the surrounding area. Small postcode areas known to have high and low area social fragmentation scores were surveyed using this index. The highly socially fragmented areas

An area of low social fragmentation

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of the city were not the most deprived; conversely the areas with the lowest social fragmentation scores although by no means poor were also far from the most salubrious part of the city.

Photographs of these contrasting areas were also taken and compared. The use of photography enabled the capturing of a sense of community that the index did not. For instance, the sense of community was conveyed by the front porches and open, well-kept space, the cleanliness of the street, the children playing, and neighbours chatting. Other areas with higher social fragmentation scores contained large, expensive houses yet they were isolated from each other by trees and shrubbery covering the front entrances, making it difficult for neighbours to walk by and chat. In addition, these places were characterized by signs of neglect of public space, poor maintenance of properties, many ‘to-let’ signs, the prevalence of graffiti, and, of course, broken windows.

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References