Neighborhoods and Health
Edited by Ichiro Kawachi and Lisa F. Berkman

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The methodological insights and specific research findings displayed in the book Neighborhoods and Health (1) signal an important advance in epidemiology. In the area of chronic disease, at least, modern epidemiology has been in the suffocating embrace of individual-level approaches for several decades. While much has been accomplished using individual risk factors and predictors, particularly in the study of cardiovascular disease, insolvable problems remain when analyses are constrained to the individual level. In particular, the large variations in disease risk observed among demographic groups—defined by race/ethnicity, social class, geography, etc.—cannot be fully explained without the use of other approaches. This book summarizes much of the recent progress that has been made in studies that use aggregate or area-wide measurements.

The book is divided into three parts. The most extensive material appears in the first section under the heading “Methodological and Conceptual Approaches to Studying Neighborhood Effects on Health.” Investigators from public health and other population sciences have distilled the methodological approaches used in their own work and disciplines to investigate variation in health among small geographic areas. The key conceptual issue of nested effects (people within neighborhoods, neighborhoods within societies) is addressed (by Anna Diez Roux), with an accompanying chapter on the statistical analysis of multilevel effects (by Subramanian, Jones, and Duncan). The well-known study of Chicago, Illinois, neighborhoods (2) serves as the primary example for two other chapters on quantitative assessment and the potential contribution of “lessons learned” in sociology. An extensive discussion of geocoding, along with detailed examples, presents additional options for investigators who want to link health data with economic and social indicators. Two contributions from United Kingdom investigators—one included in the introductory material and the other on “area-based deprivation measures”—are particularly interesting, because they move outside the somewhat narrow mold into which most US research has been cast and draw on a longer history. Research in this area in Europe appears to have taken a more pragmatic course, with attempts to find ways to directly influence policy, while in the United States there is often very little connection.

Almost two thirds of the book is devoted to methodological presentations, and the chapters under “Neighborhoods and Health Outcomes” reflect a field that is just beginning to achieve breadth and influence. A variety of topics are discussed, ranging from community-based interventions for reducing asthma morbidity to the impact of segregation. A final section, “Contours of Neighborhood Effects on Health,” deals even more broadly with some of the issues related to policy.

Overall, the book provides a useful summary of the field and includes sufficient technical material to serve as a reference work. However, it is not entirely clear that the key questions which will help this field contribute to improving public health have been identified and framed in a sufficiently clear way to have an impact. Neighborhood effects obviously arise from a number of dimensions, including such disparate factors as housing conditions, pollution, social relations, and aggregate effects of income. Just as obviously, these effects cannot be accommodated within a single study design or analytical approach. An important generic strength of ecologic or area-level studies, as suggested above, has been to highlight the relevance of factors that are not attributes of individuals. On the other hand, when we open this Pandora’s box, the emerging complexity can appear overwhelming. Many of the most important attributes of neighborhoods are determined by forces that originate at a higher level of social organization. For example, urban sprawl and residential segregation, in terms of both their historical origins and their current maintenance, are directly influenced by the economic interests of those who hold sway over the housing market. Just as the health outcomes of individuals are influenced by factors at a higher level of organization, neighborhoods’ characteristics are determined in many dimensions by broader social forces. While this dynamic is acknowledged by some authors in this text (“the embeddedness of neighborhoods within the larger system of city-wide spatial dynamics is equally relevant” (1, p. 141)), it receives less attention than factors like “social capital,” which is usually treated as an intrinsic attribute of individual neighborhoods. One wonders, will studies of neighborhoods be restricted to a reductionist approach, albeit focused on a higher level in the social hierarchy than individual-level risk factor research? This disability seems characteristic of much population science in the United States, in contrast to the work of European sociologists (for example, the late Pierre Bourdieu), which grounds individual observations in a theory of larger social processes.

Overall, this book has much to offer. The authors themselves are clearly aware of the complexities, unsolved problems, and numerous challenges that confront anyone who wants to assess quantitatively the impact of social and geographic units on health. One can hope that as the field develops in analytical sophistication and empirical experi-
ence, further integration of those units within the social structure as a whole will be possible.

REFERENCES


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