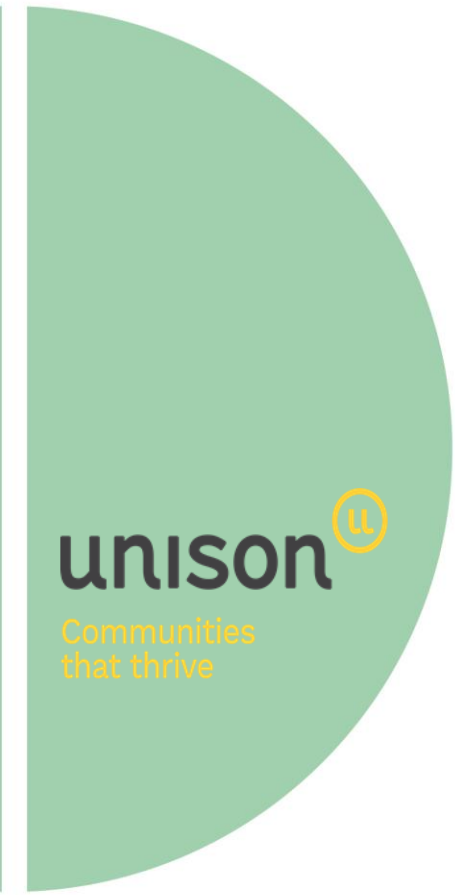
# UNISON HOUSING RESEARCH LAB

## THINK PIECE 1/17





# *Does place matter?*

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The Unison Housing Research Lab *Think Piece* series critically examines theories and evidence that are influential in the areas of social housing and homelessness, and that are pertinent to Unison's mission, policies and practice.

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*Bringing together on a single site a population homogeneous in its dispossession, strengthens that dispossession, notably with respect to culture and cultural practices: the pressures exerted at the level of class or school or in public life by those most disadvantaged or those furthest down from normal existence pull everything down in a general levelling (Bourdieu 1999).*

## Introduction

Does where you live influence your life outcomes? Researchers and policy makers seem to think so. Over the last three decades, policy makers concerned about the impact of growing up and living in poor neighbourhoods have embraced the idea of 'area-based' policies as a way of creating more socially and economically diverse neighbourhoods.

Area-based policies take a number of forms but neighbourhood renewal and mixed neighbourhoods[1] are two of the most common approaches favoured by governments around the world, including Australia[2]. Mixed neighbourhood policies are particularly relevant to Unison as the goal of these policies is to change the social and economic characteristics of areas dominated by social housing by introducing different types of tenures including home ownership and private rental. Both neighbourhood renewal and mixed neighbourhoods are seen as viable and cost effective ways of improving the life chances of residents in areas where disadvantage is entrenched.

The view that negative life outcomes associated with living in disadvantaged areas can be addressed through area-based policies is based on a relatively simple premise – poor individuals living in poor areas experience worse life outcomes than similarly poor people living in more affluent areas. If this is true then it follows that areas have an 'independent effect upon the wellbeing and life chances of individuals'

[1] A range of terms are used including mixed communities, mixed tenure, social and tenure mix.
[2] In the US, moving households out of disadvantaged communities is the favoured policy response.

(Blasius *et al.* 2007, p.627). The study of the social processes that accentuate social disadvantage in particular places is known in the literature as *area effects* or *neighbourhood effects*.

In this paper we offer a critical examination of the historical context, theoretical foundation, and empirical evidence regarding area effects because they are the foundation upon which area-based policies, including mixed neighbourhood, policies are built. Although the idea that where a person lives can 'predict his or her life outcomes' (Shelby 2017, p.547) is fashionable in policy circles, area effects remains a contested idea. Questions about which neighbourhood characteristics matter, how much they matter, and under what circumstances they matter, remain open. Further, it is unclear whether mixed neighbourhood policies are the most equitable and effective way of reducing negative area effects (Galster 2007), a point we pursue in the next paper that examines mixed neighbourhood policies more closely. We also identify a range of issues that explain why area effect studies often find puzzling results, before discussing some of the challenges and opportunities area-based policies present to Unison.

## Historical context and theoretical framework

Disadvantage is not randomly distributed. Sociological research has demonstrated that inequality predominantly results from a lack of access to resources such as financial wealth, educational qualifications, personal autonomy, and formal and informal social networks (Bourdieu 1990). Inequality is connected to area affects through the view that spatial concentrations of disadvantage are, by and large, an outcome of two processes. The first is the way that housing markets 'sort people into more or less expensive and desirable neighbourhoods based on income' (Atkinson and Kintrea 2004, p.439). The second process reflects spatial mismatches between where low-income households live and opportunities for work. The link between social disadvantage and geographical location is a long-standing theme in

sociology, urban geography and urban planning, and researchers have drawn on a number of ideas to explain how areas accentuate disadvantage. Next we identify and discuss five theoretical ideas that feature prominently in the area-effects literature.

The first idea – **collective socialisation** – emerged from Julius Wilson's renowned book, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). In his detailed study of urban poverty in Chicago, Wilson popularised the idea of area effects (he termed it 'concentration effects') as a distinct sociological phenomenon. Wilson argued that the emergence of inner city areas characterised by high rates of long-term unemployment, crime, delinquency, and drug use was due to a major structural shift in the US economy that saw an unprecedented decline in manufacturing jobs and growing employment opportunities in a more decentralised service sector. Wilson challenged both the liberal view that inner city decline was a consequence of racism, and the conservative view that it was a result of an emerging 'culture of poverty'[3].

Wilson's argument was that the presence of stable working families provided continuity and a sense of community in inner city areas. Aberrant behaviour was relatively rare as residents shared expectations and they trusted each other. However, the flight of white working families out of the inner city changed the social composition and organisation of inner city areas. As a result, social norms shifted and new neighbourhood role models emerged. Most obvious was that the majority of adults in the inner city were without work. Over time unemployment came to be an accepted social fact and therefore normalised. The same socialisation processes held true for illicit drug use, early parenthood, violence and crime, all of which were more prevalent in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods Wilson studied.

As interest in Wilson's work grew, researchers began to identify other mechanisms that accentuated place based disadvantaged. Building on Wilson's idea of collective socialisation, researchers began to focus on the composition, structure

[3] Wilson distinguished his position from the largely discredited 'culture of poverty' thesis which implies the 'internalisation' of negative attitudes and values and promotes policies that focus on addressing individual flaws and dysfunctional subcultural traits. In contrast, Wilson's argument focused on the structural constraints that caused 'concentrations effects'. According to Wilson policy activity needs to shift from changing subcultural traits to changing the structure of constraints and opportunities.

and density of **social networks** – the second theoretical idea discussed here. Access to social support and economic opportunities (what we call social capital) is realised through social networks. Although social networks are not as strongly tied to locality as they once were, social networks still retain distinctive geographic textures. Some studies suggest disadvantaged people have smaller, denser networks with less social and geographic coverage (Ellen and Turner 1997, p841; Shelby 2017). In his influential paper on social network structure and composition, '*The strength of weak ties*', Granovetter (1973) argues that an individual's social networks are characterised by either strong ties (more intimate relationships) or weak ties – less intimate relationships between acquaintances based on infrequent social interaction (e.g. co-workers). Weak ties to other social networks provide a bridge through which individuals get access to information about employment and other opportunities from more distant parts of society.

The structure and content of social networks disadvantage poor communities in two ways[4]. First, with few bridging ties to more affluent parts of society the urban poor are cut off from the resources they need to address disadvantage. Second, social networks of the disadvantaged are characterised by strong ties to 'relatively closed groups whose members share similar social and economic characteristics' (Atkinson and Kintrea 2000, p.95-96). Strong ties with similarly disadvantaged people often creates a distinct form a social capital that appears to be more useful for 'getting by rather than getting ahead' (Atkinson and Kintrea 2004; Shelby 2017). As this social capital does not translate into greater opportunities and social mobility, strong ties among the urban poor, somewhat paradoxically, can reinforce and even amplify existing deprivation.

The structure and content of social networks relates to a third possible causal mechanism - **collective efficacy**. This captures the degree to which a community is

[4] Desmond questions the treatment of relationships as made up of either strong or weak ties. He presents an interesting argument that disposable ties – 'relationships between new acquaintances characterised by accelerated intimacy, a high amount of physical co-presence, reciprocal ….resource exchange and (usually) relatively short life span - are crucial for urban survival' (Desmond 2012, p.1311). See Desmond, M. (2012). 'Disposable ties and the urban poor', *American Journal of Sociology*. 117(5): 1295-1335.

cohesive and the extent to which members can exert informal social control. On the one hand, strong ties assumes a community of mutually supportive relationships which in turn suggests a high level of social cohesiveness and control – an 'urban village' as Gans (1962) described it . On the other hand, strongly tied social groups are often inward looking resulting in social fragmentation and social isolation. Researchers have hypothesized that the willingness or otherwise of residents to sanction aberrant behaviour (e.g. graffiti; property damage) and intervene for the public good is a major source of neighbourhood variation in crime and violence (Sampson *et al.* 1997). The willingness to sanction anti-social behaviour depends, in large part, on shared expectations as well as mutual trust.

A fourth theoretical strand stresses the stigmatisation effects of large concentrations of disadvantaged people. '**Territorial'** or '**postcode stigma**' (Arthurson 2004; Wacquant *et al.* 2014) occurs 'when institutional, governmental or market actors negatively stereotype all residents of a place' (Galster 2007, p.22). Social researchers and advocates can also contribute to postcode stigma by framing studies solely in terms of an area's dysfunctional characteristics (Vinson *et al.* 2015). The reputation of an area matters - people generally do not want to live in or raise their children in areas that are perceived to be bad. People want to live in places where the schools are good, the streets are safe, and where work is valued. It is well documented that economically deprived areas generally, and social housing estates[5] more specifically, have poor reputations (Kearns *et al.* 2013). The effects of postcode stigma can be serious – employers may refrain from employing people from a particular area, and they may refrain from investing in an area (Palmer *et al.* 2004). Residents of an area may be discriminated against by banks who deny them access to credit and by insurance companies that charge higher premiums (Killen 2008). And schools may discriminate against children from an area whom they perceive to be likely trouble makers.

The fifth idea, while more relevant to urban renewal policies refers to the **quality and quantity of institutional resources** - both public and private –

[5] Palmer et al (2004) challenge this.

available in an area (Ellen and Turner 1997; Sampson *et al.* 2002). The most obvious example relates to schools. The quality of schools is important. Indeed, in Australia a conspicuous pattern of middle class mobility is driven, in part, by the reputation of schools. If schools, particularly primary schools, fail to provide students with the requisite knowledge, students often struggle later on. Poor grades and higher drop-out rates reduce labour market opportunities and compound existing disadvantage (Cuervo and Wyn, 2011). While schools are a vital community resource, libraries, community services for young people and the aged, medical facilities, the availability of after-school programs, and even access to green spaces – are all important institutional resources that can affect resident outcomes.

## Empirical results: What do area effect studies tell us?

Drawing on these ideas, a large body of literature examining area effects has been published over the last three decades, mainly in the United States and Europe. The literature is divided between evidence from quantitative studies and studies that draw on qualitative methods. Focusing first on **quantitative results**, the bulk of evidence suggests that place does matter – that lower rates of educational attainment, higher rates of unemployment, criminal involvement and teen pregnancy – are a result of neighbourhood conditions (Ellen and Turner 1997). However, the effect of place reported in quantitative studies is generally small and often insignificant. Critically, quantitative studies have failed to identify causal effects (e.g. what mechanisms create what outcomes, for whom). These problems draw attention to four specific technical challenges facing quantitative researchers.

First, studies that report area effects generally cannot rule out **selection bias** – that is when the 'selection mechanism into a neighbourhood is not independent of the outcome' (van Ham *et al*. 2012, p.12). For instance, we noted earlier that where people live is structured by household traits and the characteristics of housing and labour markets. Selection bias makes it difficult to tell if a particular outcome such as

unemployment is the result of neighbourhood factors or the fact that unemployed people are more likely than affluent households to live in a deprived area simply because it is all they can afford. While the empirical solution of using longitudinal and experimental data (e.g Randomised Controlled Trials) goes some way to addressing selection bias, it is an ever present issue for neighbourhood effect studies.

Second, researchers have assumed that neighbourhood conditions affect residents in much the same way **(assumed homogeneity)**. This has subsequently been shown to be false. Recent studies suggest that neighbourhood effects are best understood as conditional on the characteristics of individuals and neighbourhoods (Small and Feldman 2012). For instance, lifecycle factors appear to mediate area affects – areas influence children, adolescents and adults in different ways at different times. Further, even if area effects exist, there are arguably more important sources of inequality. For instance, observed family characteristics such as parents' education and income appear to play a larger role in shaping children's behaviour. While some authors dismiss areas effects altogether and argue that the intergenerational transmission of poverty is more important (Kleinman 1999), most writers agree that there are causal associations between poor neighbourhoods and other social problems (Atkinson and Kintrea 2001, p.2278) .

Third, establishing area effects is made more difficult by the fact that **natural boundaries** defining an area are rare. Quantitative studies routinely rely on administratively defined areas such as census tracts, local government areas, and post codes. These boundaries are artificial and may not necessarily align with residents' perceptions of neighbourhood. The emergence of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) provides researchers with new opportunities to develop 'bespoke geographies' that align with residents perceptions and that better capture areas affects that operate at a relatively fine spatial scale.

Finally, while high poverty or high crime neighbourhoods may have consequences for residents, it is unclear at what point the incidence of poverty or crime creates an environment that is dramatically different from another neighbourhood. In the past, researchers assumed a linear relationship between

neighbourhood characteristics and resident behaviour. That is, researchers believed that an increase in poverty rates for instance would lead to a proportional increase in negative area affects. However, area characteristics may well operate in a non-linear manner. Brought to prominence by Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point* (2000), social researchers have suggested the relationship between neighbourhood characteristics and resident behaviour might be characterised by '**threshold effects'** (Quercia and Galster 2000; Blasius *et al.,* 2007; Galster 2012). For example, in the US there seems to be a poverty threshold at around 20 per cent. When neighbourhood poverty is below 20 per cent it seems to have little impact in terms of negative outcomes for individuals. However, resident behaviour starts to change once neighbourhood poverty exceeds the 20 per cent threshold. When it reaches 40 per cent subsequent increases in poverty rates appear to have no effect on resident behaviour (Galster 2012, p.32).

The difficulty quantitative researchers have had in determining the magnitude of area affects, for whom, and through what mechanisms was famously demonstrated in the *Moving to Opportunity* (MtO) study undertaken in 1990s with 4,600 low income families with children living in high poverty public housing projects in five cities[6] across the US. The MtO was designed to understand the long-term effects of moving from a high poverty neighbourhood into a low poverty neighbourhood. MtO was a large scale randomised controlled study that, in theory, addressed many of the methodological issues previous studies suffered from, particularly selection bias. The MtO promised to provide the 'most compelling tests of the effects of neighbourhood poverty'(Small and Feldman 2012, p.62).

The results were far from what was expected. A follow-up study 4-7 year later found that families that moved into low poverty neighbourhoods reported few education gains, no gains in economic self-sufficiency, and no improvement in physical health. 'Movers' did report higher satisfaction with their living conditions and there were strong significant effects on adult mental health outcomes, but the

[6] Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City.

general consensus was that the MtO was not especially informative about area effects.

Small and Feldman (2012) subsequently challenged that view. They identify two specific reasons why the MtO offers stronger insights into area effects than previously thought. First, they show that initial results assumed homogeneity across settings and subpopulations. Testing a number of hypotheses, they demonstrate that whether and how neighbourhoods matter depends on context - that area effects are conditional on the characteristics of individuals, neighbourhoods, and cities. Second, they undertook in-depth interviews. It was through these in-depth interviews that researchers became aware of previously hidden causal mechanisms, the differential effects of neighbourhood conditions, and the 'complex relationship people have to place' (Shelby 2017, p.550)

Indeed, studies employing **qualitative techniques**, such as ethnographies and in-depth interviewing, have reported stronger and more consistent area effects than studies that use quantitative methodologies (Atkinson and Kintrea 2000; Atkinson and Kintrea 2004; Palmer *et al.* 2004; Atkinson 2008; Shelby 2017). A focus on residents' perceptions, experiences, and the meanings they attach to material objects and environments, both past and present, provide rich detailed insights into how residents make sense of their social world and the decisions they make. Indeed, qualitative research has thrown light on the complex and often contradictory experiences of living in disadvantaged areas – area induced effects can be both negative and positive and a response to 'perceptions as well as objective situations' (Atkinson and Kintrea 2004, p.452). Qualitative research provides powerful insights not only about how individuals deal with disadvantage, but also insights into the impact of existing structural inequities. There is now broad agreement that for area effects research to move forward, alongside practical, analytical, and theoretical re-orientations, researchers need to assemble true mixed methods projects that integrate qualitative and qualitative approaches (van Ham *et al.* 2012). This is because large scale studies can assist in identifying statistical relationships and

trends while qualitative research allows for the exploration of the complexity of people's lives.

## Implications and observations

For Unison, the issue of place resonates in a number of possible ways. Unison's housing stock (n=2,799[7]) is spread across 59 postcodes, each of which exhibits a wide range of socio-economic characteristics. Drawing on findings from *Dropping off the Edge* (Vinson *et al.,* 2015), a study that identified the spatial distribution of disadvantage across the country we found that nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of Unison's stock is located in the 'Most dis-advantaged' Victorian postcodes (Table 1), and just under a half (49 per cent) in 'Disadvantaged' areas. Furthermore, the distribution of housing stock across 'Most disadvantaged' and 'Disadvantaged' post codes is uneven – 49 per cent of properties in the 'Most disadvantaged' postcodes are located in just two post codes, while 69 per cent of properties located 'Disadvantaged' post codes can be found in just two areas.

**Table 1:** Location of Unison stock by postcode severity of disadvantage[8]

| | Postcode | | Properties | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** |
| Most advantaged | 5 | 9 | 61 | 2 |
| Advantaged | 17 | 29 | 701 | 25 |
| Disadvantaged | 15 | 25 | 1353 | 49 |
| Most disadvantaged | 22 | 37 | 651 | 23 |
| **TOTAL** | **59** | **100** | **2766** | **100** |

[7] Includes all housing stock – NRAS, Transitional housing, rooming house, public, community, and affordable. Accurate as of 30/10/17.

[8] The *Dropping off the Edge* report used an approach known as principle component analysis and then nested means to determine the distribution of postcodes into the four categories of severity. Using publically available data from the project we applied the same approach. 58 out of the 59 post codes were assigned to the same severity category.

The uneven spatial distribution of Unison properties has obvious operational implications such as the optimal places to locate staff. Equally, though, the location of so much stock in disadvantaged areas may well have tenant selection, cost and outcome implications that warrant further discussion and analysis.

For example, a number of international studies suggest that neighbourhood conditions influence tenant satisfaction (Galster 1987; Varady and Carrozza 2000). This is important because social housing providers are under close scrutiny to improve their effectiveness and efficiency, as well as the extent to which their tenants are satisfied. Indeed, as Pawson and Sosenko (2012, p.70) note, 'there is a growing tendency to portray user satisfaction scores as the ultimate measure of public service performance'. Every two years the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) undertakes the National Social Housing Survey (NSHS) which examines 'social housing tenancy experiences'[9]. The survey covers a range of topics and tenancy satisfaction is one of the key performance measures. In the NSHS tenancy satisfaction is tied to organisational processes and responsiveness. This makes some sense. However, with so much stock located in disadvantaged areas, and Unison's focus on housing the most chronically disadvantaged households, measuring tenancy satisfaction solely on the basis of organisational processes and responsiveness may not provide the most useful information and, indeed, may well be misleading. It is equally important to recognise that tenant satisfaction is influenced by, among other things: tenants' biographies, their previous housing experiences, and their perceptions and engagement with their neighbours and their surrounding neighbourhoods. We suggest that future research incorporate these factors.

## Conclusion

Place matters, but the extent to which the area in which we live influences what happens to us depends on a range of conditions, contexts and circumstances.

[9] For more information go to: https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/national-social-housing-survey-detailed-2016/contents/table-of-contents. Last accessed 28/11/1

Whereas, in the past, neighbourhood conditions were thought to have more or less uniform effects on residents, the diverse nature of areas, and the effect they have on residents makes it a tricky issue to examine and also to provide effective policy responses.

To date, Australian research into area effects has been limited in scope and focus. A lack of evidence has not stopped Australian policy makers from developing a suite of area-based policy responses in an attempt to reduce the damaging effects of spatial concentration of disadvantage. Nor has it stopped politicians from spruiking the benefits of area-based approaches.

While place clearly matters, it is important not to overstate the impact of neighbourhood conditions or the potential of area-based polices to reduce levels of disadvantage in areas and the broader community. Uncritically accepting area-based policies without understanding the theory and evidence base behind them will ultimately produce to less optimal policy and practice outcomes. Indeed, a critical appreciation of area effects helps us to understand why area-based policies have had such limited impact on resident behaviour. Indeed, as much as area effects focuses attention on processes that arise from within specific areas, a focus on area effects serves as a timely reminder that disadvantage is driven by broader social structures.

In the next *THINK PIECE* we build on our understanding of area effects and focus on tenure mix and examine the key assumptions that underpin it. While tenure mix seeks to 'enrich social networks and create new interaction opportunities', tenure mix can produce negative outcomes as well. For governments and housing providers recognising and understanding these different outcomes is key to more effectively connecting socially and economically excluded people to the patterns of social life of urban society, and the opportunities it provides.

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