Dealing with living in poor neighbourhoods

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Abstract In this prologue to the special issue, the guest editors place the contributions in the context of current debates on living in concentrated poverty neighbourhoods. These debates concern two broad categories of residents: poor households that are assisted to move from concentrations of poverty to lower-poverty areas (movers); and households (not exclusively the poor) that cannot move out of poor neighbourhoods or are not willing to do so, for various reasons (stayers). For the first category, the main issue is whether housing vouchers provide movers only with better housing or also with other social, psychological and economic benefits. A wealth of (partly contradictory) evidence justifies exploring a fundamental question: What should housing vouchers do? With regard to those unwilling or unable to move out of poor neighbourhoods, we focus on how residents cope with the recurrent problems and stressful circumstances in poor neighbourhoods. Here, four inter-related concepts are central to our discussion: place attachment, coping tactics, territoriality, and social network formation. Our discussion paves the way for the subsequent five papers, each dealing with one of the selected topics. The aim of this special issue is to provide new evidence that underpins or questions the current debates on living in or leaving neighbourhoods with concentrated poverty. The research reported here was done in the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands.

Keywords Poverty · Deprivation · Neighbourhoods · Residential mobility · Housing vouchers · Place attachment · Social networks · United States · Great Britain · The Netherlands

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1 Introduction

Within housing and urban research, there is a long tradition of studies focussing on residential segregation and poor neighbourhoods. These topics continue to challenge and engage researchers all over the globe, reflecting the interest in and attention to poor neighbourhoods among policymakers. Overall, residential segregation, both in ethnic and income terms, is considered an undesirable phenomenon which impacts the opportunities, prospects and quality of life of the residents, especially in urban areas. In general terms, selective migration and segregation are expected to disconnect poor residents from *mainstream society*, according to the seminal work of Wilson (1987). People living in areas of concentrated poverty are threatened by ‘neighbourhood effects’ in domains such as mental and physical health, education, employment and life satisfaction (for overviews, see Atkinson and Kintrea 2004; Ellen and Turner 1997; Galster 2002; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Musterd and Andersson 2006; Sampson et al. 2002).

A substantial part of the research into residential segregation and poor neighbourhoods deals with the formulation, implementation and effects of policy programmes and measures, especially in the United States and Europe. The December 2009 thematic issue of the *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* (vol. 24, no. 4) on “Combating residential segregation of ethnic minorities in European cities” is a clear and interesting example of this focus. Of course, the policy perspective is just one side of the coin. Equally important are the people targeted by such policies, both in and outside segregated areas and neighbourhoods with concentrated poverty.

The key driver of concentration and segregation tendencies is residential mobility, or the lack of it among certain groups. In an international overview, Bolt (2009) distinguishes five types of housing policies aimed at desegregation: (1) scattered-site programmes, (2) rental subsidy/Section 8/housing vouchers, (3) housing allocation, (4) mobility programmes, and (5) housing diversification. These policies are intended to modify the spatial distribution of inexpensive (social or public) rented housing and more expensive housing (rented or owner-occupied), as well as the mix of poor and better-off residents. Importantly, housing allocation procedures and housing diversification programmes are aimed not only at the poor residents. Tempting middle- and higher-income households to move within or into to poorer areas may lower the levels of segregation as well. In sum, desegregation policies involve both poor and more affluent residents.

While acknowledging the importance of a policy perspective, this special issue adopts a focus on residents’ perspectives of living in or leaving poor neighbourhoods in the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands. Each of the five papers approaches this topic from its own specific angle. The authors focus on the experiences and implications of living in poor neighbourhoods for two categories:

- Poor residents who are assisted to move from concentrated poverty blocks or neighbourhoods to lower-poverty areas (*movers*);
- Residents, not exclusively the poor, who cannot move out of poor neighbourhoods or are not willing to do so, for various reasons (*stayers*).

Thus, our point of departure for this prologue is not the effectiveness of policies but the question of how the residents fare. As for the first resident category (*movers*), a common aim of assisted mobility programmes is to improve their life conditions and opportunities by moving them away from crime-ridden, highly segregated areas to ‘better’ neighbourhoods with lower concentrations of poverty and (supposedly) better access to employment, schools, health care and other services. This practice is especially dominant in the United

States and far less common in Europe. There is a substantial body of research on the implications of assisted mobility programmes. However, the evidence base is far from consistent, although a few more general outcomes seem to prevail (see next section).

The second category, residents who remain in poor neighbourhoods (*stayers*), is interesting for other reasons. Many of them may wish to leave but lack the resources and opportunities to do so, or are otherwise strongly tied to their neighbourhood and do not want to leave. Either way, moving out is apparently not an option, even if daily life there is fraught with trouble getting by, crime, vandalism, nuisance, conflicts between residents and many other problems. Hence, an important issue is how *stayers* perceive their own situation and cope with the recurrent obstacles they may face in poor neighbourhoods.

We do not apply an exact definition of a poor neighbourhood—not only because the context and policies in the countries concerned are different, but also because the definition may even vary between programmes in one country. Nevertheless, the study areas in this special issue are considered as neighbourhoods with substantial concentrations of poverty and deprivation by policymakers and the residents themselves. The terms ‘deprived neighbourhood’ and ‘poor neighbourhood’ will be used interchangeably. The next two sections will briefly relate some important debates in the literature to each of the two resident categories. Then, in Sect. 4, the papers in this special issue will be introduced.

2 Assisted residential mobility

If policymakers want to improve the life situation and prospects of poor households, there are essentially two strategies: move them away to less deprived areas (*assisted residential mobility*) or try to improve their socioeconomic position and quality of life without leaving a poverty-stricken area. The first strategy is dominant in American housing and urban policies that deal with concentrated poverty. The commonly used instruments to achieve such mobility are tenant subsidies, better known as *housing vouchers*. Through housing vouchers, residents can afford to rent another dwelling somewhere else because the federal government pays part of their housing costs. Without the voucher, such a move would simply be beyond the residents’ financial resources.

The most well known tenant subsidies are the *Housing Choice Voucher Program* (HCVP, also known as Sect. 8), the court-ordered *Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program* and the *Moving to Opportunity* demonstration programme (MTO). Not surprisingly, there is a long-standing tradition in the United States of studying residential and individual outcomes in relation to participants in these mobility programmes (for overviews, see e.g. Atkinson 2005; Curley 2007; Orr et al. 2003). The MTO programme is especially useful in examining the beneficial outcomes of policy efforts, since it was intentionally established as an experiment to assess the effects of relocating households from public housing projects to low-poverty neighbourhoods (Feins and Shroder 2005, p. 1276). Overall, MTO evaluations show significant improvements with regard to housing quality, neighbourhood safety and mental and physical health (Curley 2007; Orr et al. 2003), while showing slight or no impact on ethnic residential segregation, self-sufficiency, child development, educational achievement and delinquency (e.g. Feins and Shroder 2005). In sum, “a change of address alone will never compensate for major structural barriers low-skilled people face in our economy [...]. But assisted housing has shown great promise—in particular, enabling people to live in healthier, more secure environments, free of fear and the constant risk of victimization (Turner and De Souza Briggs 2008, p. 1).

Another noteworthy policy is called *Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere* (HOPE VI). This programme was established in 1993 to redevelop the “most severely distressed” public housing projects in the nation (Popkin et al. 2004). HOPE VI targets housing developments that suffer not only from physical deterioration but also from crime, chronic unemployment, welfare dependency, inadequate services, and concentrations of extremely poor residents, minorities and single-parent families. Important measures include the demolition of public housing in the developments and building new housing that blends in with the surrounding community. This is the main difference with MTO, Gautreaux, etc.: HOPE VI aims to physically and socially redevelop *areas*, whereas the former are strictly mobility programmes, not area redevelopment efforts. Those residents who must leave because of demolition can use a housing voucher to relocate to other public housing or move into the private market, within or outside the new development. Although many of them reported improvements in safety and housing quality, the majority of HOPE VI movers still reside in extremely segregated and poverty-concentrated neighbourhoods (Buron et al. 2002; Curley 2007). Additionally, scholars have criticized the programme for breaking up residents’ social networks and the resulting loss of social support (Clampet-Lundquist 2004; Kleit and Manzo 2006; Popkin et al. 2004). Despite, or maybe because of the wealth of (partly contradictory) evidence on the merits and shortcomings of housing vouchers, some fundamental questions are now being raised: What can voucher programmes realistically achieve? And how should policymakers proceed with these programmes?

We started this section by observing two broad strategies to improve the life situation and prospects of poor households: move them away to less deprived areas or try to improve their socioeconomic position and quality of life without leaving a poverty-stricken area. While early policies of urban renewal in the US, Canada and several Western European countries focussed predominantly or exclusively on housing, many recent urban renewal policies address both housing and social problems identified in poor neighbourhoods. Rather than solely relocating lower-income households out of areas slated for redevelopment, the initiatives simultaneously address a host of issues to help residents become “upwardly mobile” or economically “self-sufficient” (Curley and Kleinhans 2010). HOPE VI is a clear example of a combined strategy, although the voucher for relocation remains a dominant feature. In sum, there is a growing recognition of the need to combine mobility-related measures with a broad set of social support mechanisms in order to truly affect the life situation of deprived residents. As such, the term ‘assisted residential mobility’ takes on a broader meaning than previously.

3 Place attachment, coping tactics, networks and territoriality

Much research on poor neighbourhoods deals with the size and nature of neighbourhood effects. Important underlying mechanisms of such effects are the neighbourhood-connected social networks and social capital enabling people to ‘get by’ or get ‘ahead’ in daily life (e.g. De Souza Briggs 1998; Galster 2002; Pinkster 2007). Somewhat less prominent in this field is the issue of residents’ attachment to their local environment. Place attachment refers to the emotional bonds developed in behavioural, affective and cognitive ties to social and physical environments (Brown and Perkins 1992; Giuliani 2003; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996). The context of poor neighbourhoods very likely affects the nature and strength of residents’ attachments. Concentrated poverty, crime, perceived disorder and social heterogeneity often hamper residents’ emotional bonds to their local

environment (e.g. Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). Nevertheless, people in highly distressed areas may express strong attachment, despite or in connection to the fact that they lack any possibility to move. In some cases, attachment is intertwined with a kind of adjustment to inevitable inadequacies (Fried 2000, p. 199; see also Vale 1997). In other words, the relation between place attachment and residential mobility is far from straightforward. Residents who cannot or are not willing to move out of distressed areas are of particular interest. If moving out is no option, how do residents cope with the persistent pressures of living in a poor neighbourhood? Do they try to improve neighbourhood conditions, whether or not by joining forces? Or do they effectively disengage from any form of participation in their neighbourhood?

Research on forms of participation and residents' efforts to improve the 'liveability' of their neighbourhood often refers to two famous strands in the literature: the Exit, Voice and Loyalty framework of Albert Hirschman (1970); and the notion of collective efficacy (e.g. Sampson et al. 1997; Van der Land and Doff, this issue). In its most basic form, 'exit' is connected to residential mobility out of distressed areas, whereas 'voice' can refer to (joint) resident efforts to change a situation. Following Hirschman, whether to choose exit or voice depends on the kind and degree of loyalty that residents have developed over time. Although, logically, one either moves out or not, the process of deliberation preceding a 'definite' choice to move or stay is very complex. It depends on the specific context, perceived problems and opportunities to deal with or avoid problematic issues in the neighbourhood, as well as one's individual resources. Similarly, (re)actions of residents who are struggling with their housing situation can be far more intricate than simply moving out or voicing their complaints and going into action. This suggests an inherent tension within the concept of place attachment, i.e. between *functional* attachment and *emotional* attachment (cf. Giuliani 2003). Functional attachments may suffer from a fear to go out in the street or an aversion to meet other residents who appear 'different' in many ways, while the emotional bond with the place where one has lived (perhaps for a long time) can stay strong enough to prevent a move out. Emotional attachment is a complex concept. It may contain many seemingly different emotional ties: to a place long gone, to friends or peers living in the area or to a future promise of a flourishing neighbourhood (cf. Fried 2000).

The intricate nature of place attachments indicates that being 'trapped' in a neighbourhood (Gans 1968) can have many different faces as well as impacts. It may mean that one has to rely on the neighbourhood because of limited mobility possibilities, when people who can provide for one's needs and offer support do not seem to be very trustworthy. Being 'trapped' may impede the development of a strong self-identity and self-esteem (cf. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996) while these are so important for getting ahead. The irony in many deprived neighbourhoods is that those who have trouble to get on in life are often ill-equipped to deal with the collective outcomes of deprivation, such as maintenance arrears and declining public space. This is an important reason to look at individual and collective capacities to effectively combat deprivation and to regain a feeling of control over what is going on in a deprived neighbourhood (cf. Sampson et al. 1997). The latter point draws our attention to the importance of social networks. The residents need to know each other on at least a superficial basis if they want to collectively tackle disorder in their neighbourhood. However, social networks are not just important for social support. These contacts can provide people with access to resources that they do not have themselves and through accessing such resources people may be able to create opportunities to improve their socioeconomic position (Van Eijk, this issue). If one's network primarily consists of poor people, the chances of gaining access to resources such as knowledge,

wealth, skills, power and information are small, as are the prospects of 'getting ahead' in life (cf. De Souza Briggs 1998). Urban policymakers worry that the population composition of concentrated poverty neighbourhoods not only reflects the (limited) resourcefulness of people's networks but also aggravates it. A fundamental question is then how the socioeconomic composition of neighbourhoods might shape personal networks and whether living in a poor neighbourhood can cause 'network poverty'.

We briefly mentioned the collective efforts of residents to combat disorder in their neighbourhood. Such efforts are not necessarily socially inclusive. Their collective nature may be limited to very specific groups with specific aims which may not be beneficial to other people present in an area. Important here is the notion of *territoriality*, i.e. a social system through which control is claimed over a defined space and defended against others (Kintrea et al., this issue). If territoriality is exercised by people who are strongly tied and/or confined to the neighbourhood, connections to the 'world outside' the claimed territory may be under pressure. In public debates, territoriality in (poor) neighbourhoods is often linked to youths and street gangs, whose presence frightens other (often older) residents. The territoriality of young people is particularly salient to the neighbourhood effect debate. There is mounting evidence that young people are more affected by where they live than other demographic groups. Blocked or foregone opportunities during the teenage or young adult years may lead to life chances being permanently diminished (Kintrea et al., this issue; cf. Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Sampson et al. 2002). Therefore, it is highly important to uncover the nature and impacts of territoriality among young people in poor neighbourhoods, and to consider to what extent territoriality is a distinctive source of disadvantage.

4 The papers in this issue

The five papers in this special issue clearly engage with the debates described in the previous two sections. One paper deals with the issues of assisted mobility (*movers*), while the other four focus on residents who cannot move out of poor neighbourhoods or are not willing to do so (*stayers*).

For many residents of deprived neighbourhoods, moving out would seem to be the best and quickest way to improve their prospects. As mentioned above, assisted mobility programmes are far more common in the United States than in Europe. Beginning around 1980, the US low-income housing policy shifted from subsidies on buildings and new construction to tenant subsidies, usually called housing vouchers. Over the past thirty years, several voucher programmes (see Sect. 2) have been enacted, resulting in numerous evaluation studies. **David Varady** claims that now is the time to ask a fundamental question: What should housing voucher programmes do in terms of improving the prospects of poor residents? Varady challenges the widespread assumption that housing vouchers help recipients move from crime-ridden inner-city areas to 'better', less poor neighbourhoods and, in turn, to achieve self-sufficiency. His review of both the American and European literature on housing mobility programmes and on mixed-income neighbourhoods actually fails to support this belief. Moreover, Varady finds evidence that voucher recipients tend to cluster spatially in specific neighbourhoods. There is a widespread fear that this may set in motion processes of social decline in neighbourhoods already vulnerable to change. Varady suggests that the housing voucher program should focus primarily on providing additional decent and affordable housing opportunities, and not so much on other issues. Moreover, policymakers urgently need to monitor voucher

settlement patterns to address programmatic weaknesses which are potential causes of negative neighbourhood effects and voucher controversies.

Subsequently, the focus is shifted to issues of place attachment, coping tactics, territoriality and social networks of residents in poor neighbourhoods. **Mark Livingston, Nick Bailey** and **Ade Kearns** delve into the intricate nature of residents' place attachment in such areas. Their paper starts with a clear observation: research shows that levels of place attachment tend to be lower in more deprived neighbourhoods. Much research into place attachment is quantitative, but precisely for that reason it is imperative to explore in detail the complex temporal and geographical influences that shape an individual's responses to or experience of a particular neighbourhood. Therefore, Livingston and colleagues use qualitative methods to examine in depth the nature of place attachment in four deprived neighbourhoods in Northern England. They find that people in deprived areas do experience place, but contrary to some expectations this experience was usually emotional rather than functional. The fact that the areas were deprived, and therefore less likely to offer benefits of distinction and self-esteem, did not act as a barrier to feelings of place attachment. Moreover, attachment to any deprived neighbourhood is partly contingent on the proximity (or not) of other deprived areas with which residents may have connections. Finally, place attachment depends partly upon the history and personality of individuals and their ability to cope with challenges presented upon arriving in a new area. At the same time, place attachment does not automatically discourage mobility, as even people with high levels of attachment said that they would move if they could.

In the same vein, **Marco van der Land** and **Wenda Doff** start from the observation that residents perceiving neighbourhood decline are likely to become less satisfied with their residential situation. Hence, they may react by way of different coping tactics. This paper combines Hirschman's Exit, Voice and Loyalty theory (1970) with insights on personal and collective efficacy, based mainly on the work of Bandura (1997) and Sampson et al. (1997). On the basis of a survey and 38 in-depth interviews in four poor neighbourhoods in the Netherlands, Van der Land and Doff distinguish three coping tactics: (partly) withdraw (*exit*), accept and adapt, and show *voice*. According to the authors, the choice of a particular coping strategy is partly explained by residents' *loyalty* to the neighbourhood. This loyalty strongly relates to the residents' place attachment and local social ties, but can also be a kind of forced loyalty, due to a (perceived) lack of opportunities to move away. Residents who cannot or do not want to move can 'exit' by deliberately withdrawing from specific places or people in their near surroundings. Exit-based tactics are often accompanied by a high degree of distrust towards other residents and/or local formal institutions. This poses serious challenges to urban or neighbourhood policies that rely on active participation by residents. Van der Land and Doff conclude that the more residents deploy exit-based coping tactics and the higher the degree of distrust among residents, the greater the pressure on collective efficacy and local social control mechanisms.

The next paper takes the opposite angle to the exit strategies described by Van der Land and Doff. **Keith Kintrea, Jon Bannister** and **Jon Pickering** explore the sources, characteristics and impacts of *territoriality* among young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. As mentioned before, *territoriality* is defined as a social system through which control is claimed over a defined space and defended against others. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with young people in six British cities, Kintrea and colleagues found that territoriality is indeed a part of everyday life for young people at the study sites. It is a kind of 'hyper place attachment', as it builds directly on young people's close identification with small home neighbourhoods, and is often expressed in violent conflict with territorial groups from other areas. The various impacts of territoriality

include restricting young people to their home neighbourhood, cutting them off from opportunities in the wider city, and criminalization. These impacts fall most heavily on boys and young men with a core involvement in territorial conflicts. Kintrea, Bannister and Pickering conclude that territoriality appears to accentuate inward-looking perspectives and extend the already high degree of social and economic isolation experienced in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They observe both consistencies and inconsistencies between their findings and those from other research, including that reported in this issue of the *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*. These differences may be a consequence of the focus on young people. But Kintrea and colleagues also call for a closer examination of the particularities of the social dynamics of poor places within different contexts, which may not be converging.

The final paper of this special issue deals with a recurrent and fundamental controversy in ‘neighbourhood effect’ studies: Does the neighbourhood affect the residents’ social networks? Through a detailed analysis of the formation of personal networks of people living in a poor neighbourhood compared to those of people living in an affluent neighbourhood in the city of Rotterdam, **Gwen van Eijk** unravels the role of the socioeconomic composition of neighbourhoods in the formation of residents’ personal networks. Her conclusion is threefold. First, having many of one’s network members living in the same neighbourhood does not necessarily mean that people draw new network members from the neighbourhood population. Rather, they locally maintain relationships that originated in other settings, such as family ties or school friends. Second, resource-poor people with small networks do not seem to compensate for their small network by forming more ties with fellow-residents. The difference in network formation between resource-poor and resource-rich people is that the latter draw network members from a wider variety of settings such as work, study, leisure, associations, etc. ‘Social isolation’ thus seems to be not a spatial problem but one of differential (opportunities for) participation in certain settings. Third, Van Eijk argues that ‘neighbourhood effect’ studies often overlook the fact that people encounter and engage with fellow-residents not in ‘the neighbourhood as a whole’ but in settings located in the neighbourhood such as schools, community centres, playgrounds and one’s ‘micro-neighbourhood’ of adjacent and nearby dwellings. Thus, to the extent that relationships are formed within the neighbourhood, this happens in specific neighbourhood settings. The composition of these settings is reflected in people’s networks rather than in the entire neighbourhood. Partly for that reason, Van Eijk calls for a shift in the urban policy focus from neighbourhood composition to neighbourhood settings. She claims that social mixing policies can only be successful if they are accompanied by initiatives to draw a mixed population to neighbourhood settings and facilitate routine encounters between resource-rich and resource-poor people.

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