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Can proximity forge strong bonds? Exploring the relationship between urban proximity and social cohesion at the neighbourhood level



In addition to the environmental and health benefits, proximity to cities also promotes the creation of strong social ties, which are associated with more resilient neighbourhoods and stable societies. A study by the Department of Geography shows how social cohesion depends on both real and perceived distance. This means creating not only well-connected neighbourhoods, but also environments that feel accessible and welcoming.

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(Re-)conceiving and (re)designing cities so that people can walk or cycle to everyday destinations such as schools, parks or shops has become a key focus of urban interventions and transport planning. While the environmental and health benefits of proximity are well known, less attention has been paid to its social impact, particularly on how people connect and build communities. This is important because strong social ties are associated with more resilient neighbourhoods and stable societies.

Our study takes a closer look at how proximity to daily destinations affects social cohesion in neighbourhoods. While previous research has examined how the design of urban spaces affects social connections, few studies have focused specifically on the role of distance to essential services and amenities. To address this, we combined objective measures (such as actual distances) with subjective measures (how close people feel destinations are) to see how they affect social cohesion in neighbourhoods.

Using survey data from five Spanish cities (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Palma de Mallorca, and Granada) and detailed maps of destination distances, we applied a statistical model (structural equation modelling - SEM) to explore the relationship. We found that the further people live from daily destinations in their neighbourhoods, the weaker their social cohesion tends to be. Interestingly, our results show that perceptions of distance - whether people feel that things are close or far - can strengthen this effect - if people feel that destinations are closer or farther than they actually are, this reinforces the impact of distance on social connections.

The takeaway? Urban planners and policy makers need to think beyond physical distance when (re)designing neighbourhoods. While it's important to ensure that essential services such as schools, parks, and shops are geographically accessible, it's equally important to consider how people perceive their proximity to these places. If people feel that destinations are closer or easier to reach, they are more likely to engage with their surroundings and neighbours, building stronger social ties. This means creating not only well-connected neighbourhoods, but also environments that feel accessible and welcoming. By focusing on both real and perceived proximity, cities can foster a sense of belonging, encourage interaction, and strengthen the social fabric of communities.

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