The role of spatial configuration in social isolation

Professor Laura Vaughan
What do we know about loneliness (and sociability) and the built environment?

- Public spaces provide social arenas for residents, workers, shoppers, visitors, children at play & etc.
- Additionally social infrastructure: schools, libraries, places of worship, as well as broader social connectivity enrich this
- This social potential is shaped (at least in part) by the configuration of the built environment
- Spatial analysis can identify and empirically measure physically isolated locations and neighbourhoods, highlighting community structures

What do we know about spatial configuration and social interaction?

- Walkability of area contributes to physical as well as mental wellbeing
- Shorter distances to centre, higher densities can facilitate everyday encounter and community building
- Opportunities for everyday encounter driven by accessibility + mix of land uses in town centre
- Levels of personal resilience can predict the perceived levels of contentment in neighbourhoods.
How do we research loneliness (and sociability) and the built environment?

- We can predict these spatial patterns: accessibility, land use diversity, and population density.
- We can seek to ameliorate this unevenness by increasing connectivity + other interventions.
- Poor air quality, stressful, unsafe, noisy and littered environments contribute to poor wellbeing.
- Urban design can improve physical activity, walkability, access to healthy food, contact with nature and positive social contact.

Map of social isolation in Cotswolds: The ‘aggregated isolation indices’ were divided into quintiles and mapped to identify hot spots. Red indicates the most vulnerable LSOAs and yellow the least vulnerable. © Cotswold District Council (https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/media/777436/Appendix-1-Social-Isolation-in-Gloucestershire.PDF)
What questions remain unanswered? What can we do as a network?

- How do we create the sociability and intimacy in public space that welcomes others?
- Latest loneliness research emphasises social connection and social support: What interventions work?
- Confounding factors:
  - Lack of contact more likely in certain circumstances e.g., depression, poor health, physical immobility, older age
  - Impact of deprivation on social isolation and mental poor health
Summary

- What works? Review of reviews states community building, supported socialisation, alongside cognitive therapies, advice and signposting activities.
- What might we be overlooking?
  - The role of place-based design in shaping community interaction.
  - The role of urban design in limiting spatial isolation and in shaping opportunities for walkability (access to public transport & town centre activities via safe, walkable routes).

Image from What Works Wellbeing - https://whatworkswellbeing.org/product/tackling-loneliness-slide-deck/ © Licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)
References


