

Briefing Paper 113

Patterns of social capital, voluntary activity and area deprivation in England

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Abstract

This study uses data from the 2005 and 2007 Citizenship Survey to map broad differences in levels of volunteering and social capital between ninety different types of place in England, characterised by their regional location and level of deprivation. A measure of social capital in each type of place is constructed using a multivariate multilevel statistical model and the association with rates of volunteering is then examined. The results show a positive association at the area level between the level of formal volunteering and informal volunteering and the level of social capital. The rate of both formal and informal volunteering was, however, unrelated to the level of social capital after controlling for area deprivation. These results raise concerns about the ability of volunteering to change the social characteristics of deprived areas independently of their material circumstances. Communities have strengths primarily in areas concerned with maintaining social order rather than creating economic growth. Policies to tackle area deprivation need to concentrate on linking deprived areas up to economic opportunities in more affluent surrounding areas rather than on local strategies based on self-help.

Keywords: citizenship survey, social capital, volunteering, Big Society

Summary paper

One of the virtues of voluntarism is that it is considered an important source of social capital or a source of social resources which people can invest in and which can bring returns in the future. Social capital refers broadly to the benefits in terms of co-operation and support that may be gained from group membership. The returns from social capital, as claimed by supporters of the concept, include things like help in finding a job, help with daily chores like picking children up from school and even, in the longer term, improved health outcomes. Participation in voluntary organisations is seen as leading to the development of attitudes such as trust, at both an individual and at an aggregate level. In turn this allows individuals to cooperate and the implication is that this will in turn produce improved outcomes for individuals and communities. The analysis set out to examine whether this model fits the data and, in particular, whether it holds across both deprived and affluent areas.

Measuring social capital for geographical areas is challenging. Characteristically, many studies use a survey-based measure, such as the proportion of people who say that they trust others. A problem is that such measures are often available only for large spatial units, and whether or not analyses control for the composition of people in different

geographical areas (which may affect the pattern of responses to such questions) is not always clear. Such survey data are rarely if ever available for small areas, but socio-economic differences are most evident at a local scale and so it is desirable that we attempt to measure social capital at the small area scale as well.

The data source used (the 2005 and 2007 Home Office Citizenship Survey) allows us to distinguish ninety different types of place distinguished by a cross-classification of region and the decile of local area deprivation (the Index of Multiple Deprivation for Lower Super Output Areas – deciles are constructed by ranking an index and dividing it into ten equal parts). The analysis was undertaken in two steps. First, a measure of the level of social capital in each type of place was constructed using a multivariate multilevel statistical model (see journal article ¹for further details of the model). The association of the level of social capital with the rate of volunteering was then examined. Our interest is whether there is a positive relationship between social capital and volunteering and how this association is influenced by area deprivation.

We used four questions from the Citizenship Survey to measure social capital. These

¹ McCulloch A, Mohan J, Smith P, 2012, "Patterns of social capital, voluntary activity, and area deprivation in England" *Environment and Planning A* **44**(5) 1130 – 1147

concerned: trust in one's neighbours, whether neighbours pull together to improve the neighbourhood, whether neighbours share values, and strength of attachment to neighbourhood. In order to calculate a single area-level indicator of social capital in each area, we use a multivariate multilevel statistical model, which controls for compositional effects (such as the different socio-economic mix of people in neighbourhoods). The main measure of volunteering that we are interested in is involvement in formal volunteering (in the survey, respondents are asked about whether or not they have carried out voluntary activity as part of a formal, organised group).

The figure below plots the estimates of the level of social capital in each of the different types of area. The estimates are plotted in order of increasing level of deprivation within each region. So the figure shows that across regions there is a negative relationship between the level of social capital and the level of area deprivation such that the lowest levels of social capital are found in the most deprived areas and the highest levels in the most affluent areas.

Figure 1

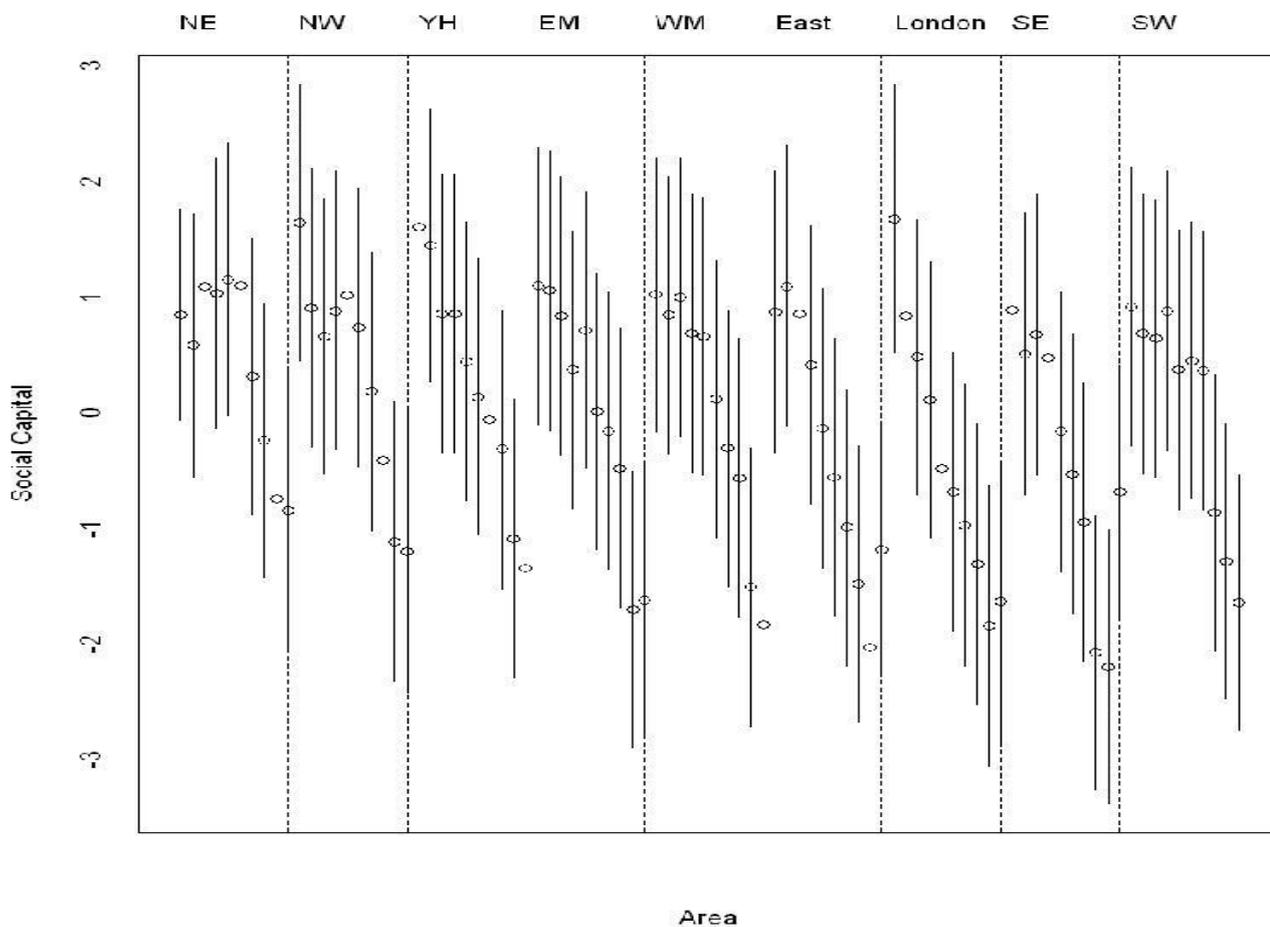
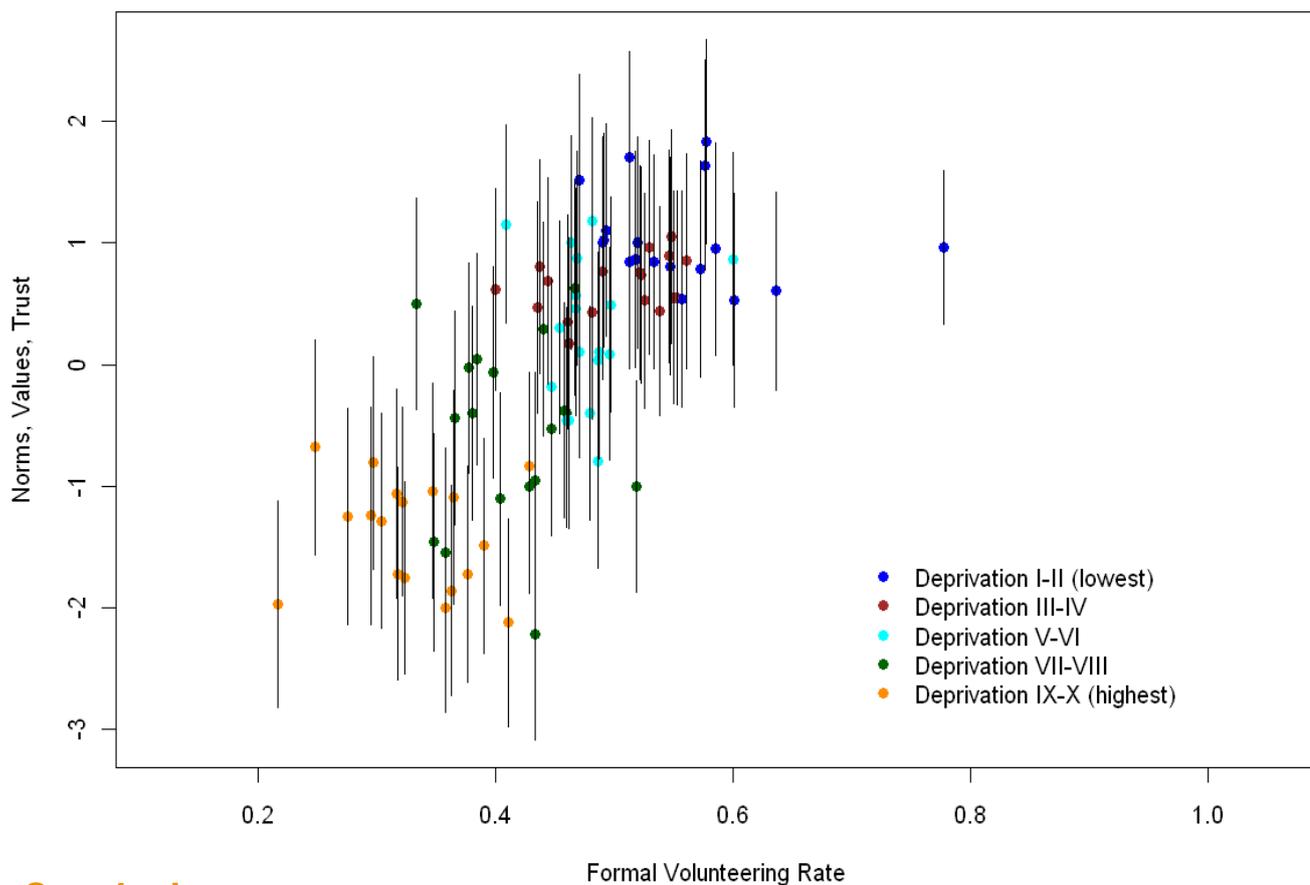


Figure: Estimates of the level of norms, values and trust in each type of area (+/- 2 standard errors). (NE = North East, NW = North West, YH = Yorkshire and Humberside, EM = East Midlands, WM = West Midlands, East = East of England, SE = South East, SW = South West).

The main focus of interest is the association between the rate of volunteering in an area and the area-level estimate of social capital. The next figure below plots the rate of formal volunteering and the level of social capital for each area with areas distinguished according to decile of area deprivation. The results in the figure show that there is an overall positive relationship between formal volunteering and social capital. The association between formal

volunteering and social capital was not, however, independent of area deprivation. A comparison of volunteering and social capital between areas with the same level of deprivation in different regions shows that although the level of formal volunteering varies across regions, this is not associated with any significant variation in the level of social capital.

Figure 2



Conclusions

These results raise concerns about the potential impact of policies designed to increase levels of social capital in communities and in so doing, to promote regeneration. Communities have strengths primarily in areas concerned with maintaining social order rather than creating economic growth. Strengthening voluntary activity might therefore help in building the internal connections within communities but it is also possible that it will not strengthen connections between communities. The survey data tells us where volunteers live, not where they volunteer, but the great majority of voluntary organisations are small, neighbourhood-level entities located

in the more prosperous areas. Furthermore, the analysis shows that whether or not voluntary action generates an increase in social capital, it will not, on its own, do much to reverse patterns of disadvantage. Policies to tackle area deprivation need to concentrate on linking deprived areas up to economic opportunities in more affluent surrounding areas rather than on local strategies based on self-help.



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