

The Spatialities of Ageing in Britain: Is Residential Age Segregation Increasing?

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Abstract

Ageing is a feature not just of individuals but also of many European societies, and it has implications for intergenerational social distance in different locales or communities. With the proportion of older adults expected to grow significantly over the next few decades in Europe, a number of pertinent questions are raised about the socio-spatial processes that underlie residential age segregation, especially in circumstances where it may be increasing. The aim of this paper is to investigate whether, and to what degree, residential age segregation is changing in Britain since the beginning of the millennium. To address our main research question –how residentially segregated are the old *versus* the young?, we examine general and urban/rural patterns of residence of older groups (50+ and 65+) compared to younger groups (aged 16-40) using population data from the 2001 and 2011 Censuses, and the latest urban/rural classification for Output Areas in England and Wales. The results reveal increasing segregation over time between older and younger groups, mostly as a result of greater unevenness between groups in post-retirement ages (65+) and groups in the middle-aged phase (30-35). The geographical separation between older and younger age groups is growing predominantly in urban settings such as major and minor conurbations and some urban cities/towns. Although the results also highlight an important socio-economic dimension of age segregation that is not felt uniformly but differs across urban/rural localities, the consequences of these trends of residential age segregation remain unclear. The findings aim to contribute to current debates about intergenerational relationships in contemporary Britain, and the multiple ways in which demographic change, residential *immobility* and the housing system interact at different scales to produce and promote the spatialities of ageing.

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Background

Population ageing has reshaped population composition nationally, although such changes are most felt regionally and, above all, locally. The relationship between age (or social generations) and space remains an under-researched field of empirical enquiry, despite growing concerns that demographic and institutional changes have led to the social and spatial separation of extra-familial generations (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2006), with recent scholarship highlighting the importance of creating intergenerational spaces where people of different ages can meet and interact (Vanderbeck and Worth, 2015; WHO, 2007¹). Social cohesion may be equally threatened if different age groups in a population live separate lives in different neighbourhoods (Andrews and Phillips, 2005). This last observation stems from the notion that limited contact and personal knowledge across groups create a dichotomy between “us” and “them”, which is often associated with increased competition between age groups for limited public resources to support the interests, agendas, services, and institutions that best meet their age-specific needs (Binstock, 2010).

In policy terms, a few studies in the USA have highlighted the dichotomous positions of residential integration-segregation of older populations based on positions of equity vs. efficiency (Rosenberg and Everitt, 2001). While some policies are developed to enhance the integration of older adults into the rest of society, other policies are framed by the view that seniors should (and want to) be segregated from the rest of society. Although the latter view is primarily focused on the extreme version of residential age segregation which normally occurs in intentionally age-segregated housing (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005), the current policy focus in Britain and elsewhere on ‘ageing in place’ is also expected to increase age segregation, especially if the socio-economic status of older people influences their capacity to move house. Moreover, residential *immobility* is not only affecting older people in Britain. Existing evidence suggests that residential aspirations are being significantly impeded across the population age spectrum by housing market failures, just as public resources are becoming constrained (Pennington, 2012). While aspirations for residential independence and home-ownership among young adults have been most profoundly affected (Graham et al. 2015a), residential mobility has also decreased among older adults (Graham et al. 2015b). When residential *immobility* increases, this can have an immediate negative effect on the pace and places of age mixing. Although these structural processes might be related to a rise in secular rootedness (Cooke, 2011), and some outcomes may only be visible in the years to come, previous research suggests that strong efforts are necessary to create “spaces where young, middle-aged and older people from all walks of life can get to know each other enough to build mutual respect, develop cooperative relationships, and reignite the norm of human-heartedness” (Braithwaite, 2002: 332).

This paper seeks to enhance understanding of the spatialities of ageing in Britain by investigating whether, and to what degree, residential age segregation is changing in Britain since the beginning of the millennium. To address our main research question –how residentially segregated are the old *versus* the young?, we examine general patterns of urban-rural residence of older groups (50+ and 65+) compared to younger groups (aged 16-40) using population data from the 2001 and 2011 Censuses, and the latest urban/rural classification for Output Areas in England and Wales. The paper thus provides both empirical evidence and critical insight into the transforming relationships between younger and older members of contemporary societies, which are a central consideration

¹ The World Health Organisation initiative on ‘global age friendly cities’ demonstrates the relevance of the spatialities of ageing to international urban policy making.

in geographical gerontology (Andrews et al. 2007) and in current debates on spatialities of ageing (Schwanen et al. 2012).

Data and Methods

Population data from the 2001 and 2011 Census rounds in England and Wales are used in conjunction with a detailed urban/rural classification (the Output Area Classification from the Office for National Statistics). Small area data from censuses offer unique information for the analysis of whether, and to what degree, age segregation is increasing. Methodologically, the paper presents evidence of changes in segregation by age both nationally and for urban/rural areas. For this purpose, the index of dissimilarity (evenness) is employed to document patterns of residential segregation by age across Output Areas (micro scale) in England and Wales and across a range of urban/rural contexts. These analyses represent crucial steps to understanding the geographical distributions of older and younger groups, and provide further insights into the residential *immobility* processes and geographical contexts that underlie trends in age segregation.

Findings and Policy Implications

The results reveal an increase in the level of separation between older and younger age groups since 2001. The results reveal that increasing residential segregation over time is mostly due to greater unevenness between groups in post-retirement ages (65+) and groups in the middle-aged phase (30-35). The geographical separation between older and younger age groups is growing predominantly in urban settings such as major and minor conurbations and some urban cities/towns. Although the results also highlight an important socio-economic dimension of age segregation that is not felt uniformly but differs across urban/rural localities, the consequences of these trends of residential age segregation remain unclear.

Arguments favouring age segregation on the grounds of efficient service provision may make economic sense but they are seriously challenged by potentially adverse consequences for social cohesion (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005, 2006). While the family realm appears to be qualitatively different from other social arenas and still provides support for cross-age relationships in Western societies (Dykstra, 2010), there is considerable scope for future research to gain a better understanding of how socio-spatial age segregation is produced and the threats it poses to social cohesion. The age differentiation of space is often taken for granted by policymakers, who may overlook the negative societal implications of changing age composition in neighbourhoods and, particularly, of increases in socio-spatial segregation. Competition between age groups for limited public and private resources to support the interests and agendas that best meet their age-specific needs has the potential to shape local service provision in favour of particular age groups and thus further entrench age segregation. Equally, fewer opportunities for different age groups to share common goals and intergenerational knowledge transfers can impede the creation and maintenance of a generative society (Binstock, 2010). While the term ‘segregation’ in Britain and elsewhere is almost entirely associated in academic and policy circles with racial and ethnic segregation rather than segregation by age, it is clear that the emergence of socio-spatial age segregation deserves more attention (Graham and Sabater, 2015).

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