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MOBILITY EFFECTS ON NEIGHBOURLINESS

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Abstract

The importance of face-to-face interactions with neighbours, friends and relatives for life satisfaction is undisputed. However, a number of theoretical arguments suggest that the role of the neighbourhood in people's social lives is diminishing. Urbanisation, specialisation, and bureaucratisation lead to socially more heterogeneous and physically more mobile societies in which the sense of community and solidarity is lost (Durkheim 1893, Simmel 1908, Toennies 1887). Access to public transportation and telecommunications furthermore make distance less of a constraint in maintaining contacts to like minded people who may not live next door (Wellman 1979). The erosion of the importance of place is also picked up in the debate about the effects of globalisation and post-modernity (Sennett 1998).

Drawing on data derived from consecutive waves of the German Socio-economic Panel Study (SOEP) we investigate empirically the strength of people's ties with close neighbours and with their families and the sensitivity thereof to changes in residential mobility, access to modes of public and private transport, and changes in the availability of modern communications technologies. Our empirical results suggest that people in Germany have become residentially, physically and virtually more mobile in the decade from 1994 to 2004. All forms of mobility are negatively associated with visiting neighbours. Internet use also undermines personal interaction with family. Overall, the empirical evidence indicates that neighbourhood social ties are less resilient than family ties to greater mobility. With further increases in mobility, close neighbours may become less relevant. Nevertheless, presently the incidence of visits with neighbours is sizeable; in contrast to the frequent assertion in the literature that the neighbourhood is of no importance.

JEL Classification: J19, R29, Y8, Z13

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