



Understanding  
Society

# Neighbourhoods, ethnicity & well-being

Using Understanding Society to explore life  
satisfaction amongst ethnic minority communities



## Is it a good idea for ethnic minority groups to live in concentrated areas of neighbourhoods, towns and cities? Some argue that this prevents integration and stops the UK from becoming truly diverse, while others highlight the protection it can provide minority groups from issues such as discrimination and its positive impact on minority members' health.

To date no studies have looked at how living in such areas might affect the subjective well-being of the different ethnic groups who make up those communities. Very little research has been carried out on how ethnic minorities subjectively value their lives, with just a few small-scale studies producing variable results.

This project funded by NORFACE (New Opportunities for Research Funding Co-Operation Agency in Europe – a network of 15 national research funding organisations in Europe and Canada) is part of a wider Research Programme on Migration. The research paper *Life satisfaction, ethnicity and neighbourhoods: Is there an effect on neighbourhood composition on life satisfaction?* Explores for the first time in the UK whether the make-up of a neighbourhood is linked to the life satisfaction of ethnic minority groups.

### Key findings

Initial findings reveal considerable variation in life satisfaction and neighbourhood contexts across ethnic groups and across generations.

- All minority ethnic groups in the study have lower life satisfaction than the white majority. This is linked in part but not entirely to factors such as lower socio-economic status and higher area deprivation where they live.
- Generally, the research found that people are happier when they are living amongst those of the same broad ethnic group as them, but there is a lot of variation across ethnic groups and across generations within these groups. For example, some but not all UK-born ethnic minorities feel happier in neighbourhoods with more people from the same ethnic group as them, but the opposite is true of the first generation in these groups.

### The research

The research by Dr Gundi Knies and Dr Alita Nandi from the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex and Professor Lucinda Platt from the London School of Economics is part of a wider NORFACE-funded project looking at migrant diversity and regional disparity in Europe.

The main questions the research is looking to address are:

1. What is the level of life satisfaction of ethnic minorities?
2. Does life satisfaction vary from one ethnic group to another?
3. Can variations in life satisfaction within a minority community be attributed to the ethnic composition of that neighbourhood?
4. Do different ethnic groups respond to different neighbourhood composition in different ways?
5. What other factors affect life satisfaction in minority ethnic groups?

In order to do this, the researchers looked at neighbourhoods in terms of the proportion of:

- Ethnic minority residents
- Non-white residents
- People from the same ethnic group as the respondent

They also looked at the deprivation of areas, and whether that explained any differences in satisfaction or in the impact of the ethnic composition of areas. This is important as there is a tendency for areas with a higher proportion of minority groups to be more deprived, though there are also some poorer areas that are very ethnically homogenous.

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***For the first time we can provide empirical evidence to inform the debate on how neighbourhoods can impact on life satisfaction among different ethnic groups.***

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# WHY EXPECT DIFFERENCES IN LIFE SATISFACTION ACROSS ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS?



## Why Understanding Society?

The research exploits some of the study's unique and innovative features including:

**Sample size:** Interviews with 30,000 households surveyed annually collecting a host of background information on family, income, work, and health, as well as holding information on respondents' age, sex, and country of origin.

**Well-being:** A series of questions measuring subjective well-being, alongside questions on aspects of life known to impact on life satisfaction.

**Ethnic minority boost:** An Ethnic Minority Boost sample of an additional 1000 adults from each of five key ethnic minority groups, in addition to those sampled in the representative national population survey. This large sample size ensures meaningful numbers from each of the ethnic groups, allowing all the main groups to be analysed individually.

**Neighbourhoods:** Data collected from a wider number of neighbourhoods across the UK than any comparable study.

Understanding Society data have advantages over the small, regional samples typically analysed in the field of ethnicity and neighbourhood effects research. In particular, it allows a focus on differences across distinct ethnic groups, rather than aggregates such as 'non-White' or 'Asian', and to examine a wide range of different neighbourhood contexts. Key census statistics describing socio economic and ethnic composition, as well as area income and consumer profiles collected by Experian were linked to the survey respondents' home addresses, in order to classify the local neighbourhood of each respondent.

Another key feature of Understanding Society is that it allows five minutes of extra interviewing time for additional questions to both the ethnic minority boost sample and the non boost sample. This includes those minorities who live in areas of low minority concentration. The five minutes cover topics such as harassment, ethnic identity and remittances. This enables research to explore the role of such experiences in accounting for differences in well-being across groups and in differences in the impact of local neighbourhoods on wellbeing.

Which ethnic minority groups reported being more or less happy than their white counterparts? The research looks at general life satisfaction without accounting for the ethnic make-up of where individuals live, but accounting for the ethnic composition factor.

In general (the left hand columns), most ethnic minorities except Pakistanis report being slightly less satisfied with their life than whites. However, most ethnic minorities who lived with a higher percentage of their own ethnic group reported being happier.

## Policy implications

In recent years, life satisfaction has become closely linked to a range of positive outcomes such as being more socially and economically successful, having a more fulfilling relationship, high incomes, more community involvement and a longer healthier life.

In 2010 the Prime Minister launched the Measuring National Well-being Programme, to start measuring the UK's progress not just in material terms such as people's standard of living, but in terms of whether people's quality of life is (or is not) improving.

Since then the Office of National Statistics has developed measures of well-being; and its first report came out in 2012. Subjective Well-being (SWB), and Life Satisfaction are included in a broad set of measures that ONS have developed as part of an emerging measurement framework for national well-being.

According to Sir Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary, the challenge now is to focus on how best to use "wellbeing" in the policy making process, as is beginning to happen in the HM Treasury and DWP Green Book discussion paper on how to use subjective wellbeing to inform cost benefit analysis and monetise non-market goods and services. The current indicators are regarded as experimental statistics and very much in development, drawing in new evidence and international comparisons.

Research to date suggests that life satisfaction is influenced by the community individuals live in, the home they live in and the degree of social cohesion within the community.

These new findings suggest that some ethnic groups are less happy than others and experience lower levels of well-being as a result. It evaluates whether neighbourhood type makes a difference to well-being and whether a greater percentage of co-ethnics (ie, those of the same ethnic group) promotes well-being. It finds this is not the case for minority groups, though the White British do seem to experience higher life satisfaction in less diverse areas. It suggests that other factors beyond those considered in this research are responsible for the lower well-being of the UK's minority ethnic groups.

With ongoing policy developments and debates around well-being, ethnic integration and inequality, this and subsequent related research can expect to make a significant contribution in bringing together and disentangling complex discussions around ethnic disadvantage and concentration, neighbourhood effects and life satisfaction.

Next steps are to take into account people's experience of discrimination, harassment and alienation.

## Further information and outputs

Dr Gundi Knies  
podcast: [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/podcasts/2014/01](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/podcasts/2014/01)

NORFACE - Migrant Diversity and Regional Disparity in Europe  
[www.norface-migration.org/currentprojectdetail.php?proj=5](http://www.norface-migration.org/currentprojectdetail.php?proj=5).


ONS Measuring National Well-Being Programme: [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html)

If you would like a more detailed briefing on this research or to discuss how you can make use of Understanding Society in your research please email [info@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:info@understandingsociety.ac.uk)

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 Understanding Society - UK Household Longitudinal Study

This case study is part of a series aimed at potential users of Understanding Society data, including: policy makers, researchers and people in a position to influence social policy. If you are using data from Understanding Society and would like to profile your work, please email [info@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:info@understandingsociety.ac.uk)



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