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Dissecting and tracking socio-spatial disadvantage in urban Australia

Hal Pawson *, Shanaka Herath [1]

City Futures Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Despite over 20 years of uninterrupted economic growth and population expansion, distinct concentrations of poverty and disadvantage remain extant in all Australia's major conurbations. This paper systematically identifies, classifies and maps disadvantaged places in the nation's largest cities – Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Our exploratory analysis indicates the presence of four distinct disadvantaged area types across the three cities. For each city we measure the ongoing intensification of spatially concentrated disadvantage and the pace at which 'disadvantage epicentres' have continued to shift outwards in the direction of the metropolitan periphery. Contributing to this process, the small fraction of disadvantaged suburbs exiting the 'disadvantaged' cohort 2006–2011 were predominantly those located closer to CBDs. 2006–2011 change over time analysis also validates the typology in highlighting that particular types of low-income suburbs have had a disproportionate propensity to acquire 'disadvantaged' status over this period.

Introduction

Socio-spatial differentiation is widely noted in the urban studies literature on many higher income countries including the US (Abramson & Tobin, 1995; Galster & Mikelsons, 1995; Jargowsky, 1997; Lichter, Parisi, & Taquino, 2012), the UK (Power, 2012; Rae, 2012) and Australia (Pinnegar, Randolph, & Davison, 2011; Randolph & Holloway, 2005a). As stressed in US analyses, such patterns may be symptomatic of the locally-specific negative impacts of post-industrial economic restructuring and/or the historically-determined siting of housing tracts affordable to low-income groups – including public housing estates. While the linkage between public housing and disadvantaged places is familiar in Australian cities (Arthurson, 1998) Australia's experience is distinct from cities in the US and certain other developed countries in its limited legacy of deindustrialization.

Within the urban studies literature, 'disadvantaged area' has been conceptualized in a number of distinct yet inter-related ways. Firstly, there is a conception related to the spatial concentration of disadvantaged persons – i.e. people experiencing poverty, deprivation or social exclusion. A shorthand term for this would be a 'people-based' approach. Several Australian scholarly articles have used typology analysis in operationalizing this conception (see: Baum, 2006; Baum, Haynes, van Gellecum, & Han, 2006; Reynolds & Wulff, 2005). A second notion of 'disadvantaged area' refers to a place which (innately) disadvantages its residents. Place-based disadvantage of this kind may stem from limited access to employment openings, government-provided services and other amenities. It could also reflect negative local environmental aspects such as pollution. Indices computed by Dodson and Sipe (2007, 2008) incorporate the transport disadvantage concept as it applies in the Australian context. Thirdly, localities affected by high rates of social dysfunction – e.g. domestic violence, vandalism, substance abuse, etc. – can be interpreted as 'disadvantaged places'. Conceptualized in this way (e.g. Vinson, 1999, 2007), the spatial pattern of disadvantage is measured using 'social pathology' indicators.

However, while 'geographies of disadvantage' associated with each of the above conceptualisations would certainly be non-identical, it seems highly likely that there would be extensive spatial overlap.[2] In any case, our primary interest was to explore and calibrate the diversity of 'disadvantaged places', rather than to compare alternative geographies of disadvantage (e.g. place-based versus people-based). Also factoring in considerations about the availability of data at an appropriate spatial scale (see below), we opted to conceptualize 'disadvantaged areas' with respect to spatial concentrations of disadvantaged persons – as identifiable via Australia's

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 (2) 9385 5078.
E-mail addresses: h.pawson@unsw.edu.au (H. Pawson), shanaka.herath@unsw.edu.au (S. Herath).
[1] Tel.: +61 (2) 9385 4931.

[2] This is, for example, evident from a comparison between the 'social pathology' based geography of social disadvantage for Sydney and Melbourne mapped by Vinson (1999) and that generated by our 'socio-economic' based approach as shown in Figs. 1 and 2.

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widely applied Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) index of disadvantage known as 'SEIFA' (see below). Given this paper's prime focus on identifying, classifying and analyzing socio-spatial disadvantage so defined, policy implications following from our findings are referenced only relatively briefly in the conclusion.

Historically, Australia's geography of urban poverty had similarities with that in many cities in the US and Europe, with disadvantaged populations heavily concentrated in inner metropolitan areas of Sydney and Melbourne (Kendig, 1979). Latterly, however, Australia's major cities have witnessed an ongoing dynamic of suburbanizing disadvantage partly linked with inner urban area gentrification (Badcock, 1994; Baum & Gleeson, 2010; Maher, 1992; Randolph & Holloway, 2005b, 2007; Yates & Vipond, 1990). While similar urban processes have been widely seen across the developed world (Atkinson, 2004; Davidson, 2008; Lees, 2008) these have been especially vigorous in Australia. Particularly in Sydney, inner city gentrification 'push factor' has been magnified by the historic 'outer metropolitan' siting of many public housing estates (Badcock, 1984), by the 'new migrant magnet' effect of private housing affordable to low income households in certain peripheral suburbs (Birrell, 1993) and by the geography of economic change (Murphy & Watson, 1994).

In the urban studies literature, the broader term 'social disadvantage' is closely linked with notions such as poverty, social deprivation and social exclusion. While these concepts overlap, their distinct meanings need to be recognized in order to wholly comprehend their precise importance. Poverty can be most simply defined as where a person lacks the adequate income sufficient to attain acceptable levels of material resources (or living standard) (e.g. Government of Ireland, 2007; Saunders, 2011). The broader concept of social exclusion describes the consequence of a combination of processes denying 'citizenship' rights, opportunities and resources (Levitas et al., 2007). The wider concept 'social disadvantage' refers to the situation of people in possession of relatively low material prosperity – as regards material resources or social participation opportunities and life outcomes (Randolph & Holloway, 2005b). Bringing these concepts together within a geographical context, 'socio-spatial disadvantage' refers to the geographic grouping of populations whose limited income (poverty) and resources deny them of a socially acceptable living standard (deprivation) and inhibit their scope for social/economic participation (social exclusion).

Spatially concentrated social disadvantage is considered problematic partly because of the hypothesized problem of 'neighborhood' or 'area' effects (Galster, Marcotte, Mandell, Wolman, & Augustine, 2007). This refers to the idea that, 'deprived people who live in deprived areas may have their life chances reduced compared to their counterparts in more socially mixed neighborhoods'. Thus '. . .living in a neighborhood which is predominantly poor is itself a source of disadvantage' (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2001, pp. 3–4). Although remaining academically contested (e.g. Cheshire, 2007), this contention has gained growing recognition and acceptance within the urban policymaker community in Australia and internationally – see, for example, Vinson (2009). Thinking of this kind has been cited by many governments in justifying 'de-concentration' of larger public housing estates (Darcy, 2010). As demonstrated in the current research, concentrated disadvantage is certainly liable to evoke media-generated stigmatization strongly believed by local residents as 'blighting' the prospects of entire communities (Cheshire, Pawson, Easthope, & Stone, 2014). Beyond confirming this observation, however, the resources for the current study did not permit us to analyse the wider validity of the 'neighborhood effects' thesis.

Nevertheless, with spatially concentrated poverty generally considered problematic by urban planners, there is a consequential need for policymakers, to understand the spatial distribution of disadvantaged areas across cities. Equally, there is a requirement to appreciate and comprehend the nature and diversity of such areas (Pinnegar et al., 2011). Identifying, mapping and classifying such areas thus assume paramount importance. As a contribution to methodological development relevant to this area, we report here a method for identifying and typologising disadvantaged places which has produced an overview of the evolving geography of such localities in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane – three cities which accommodate almost half of Australia's entire population. Conducted in the course of a larger study funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), the main objective was to create a platform and analytical framework for subsequent primary and secondary research in the three cities (Cheshire et al., 2014; Hulse, Pawson, Reynolds, & Herath, 2014).

This paper addresses three key research questions:

- What is the (people-based) geography of disadvantage across Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane?
- How can the heterogeneity of disadvantaged areas be understood and captured?
- In what ways is Australia's geography of urban disadvantage evolving over time?

A more specific reason for investigating social and housing system diversity among 'disadvantaged places' in Australia is the understanding that the linkage between public housing and disadvantage has historically provided the main framing for policymaker interest in this subject. Hence, while the majority of Australia's low income households live in privately owned dwellings, 'housing and urban policy frameworks in Australia have remained essentially silent in places where those concentrations are cross-tenure or predominantly housed within the private sector' (Pinnegar et al., 2011, pp. 3).

A critical precursor to analyzing the geography of poverty is the choice of an appropriate analytical scale. Inevitably, such decisions are greatly influenced by considerations on data availability.[3] In Australia, the critical role of census data in any poverty-mapping assignment means the researcher's choice is limited to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)-recognized geographies. Our own thinking here was shaped by an understanding that the average population size of the chosen analytical unit needed to be sufficient for sound quantitative analysis while not so large that substantial internal diversity might 'dilute' (and in the process render statistically invisible) any sizeable spatial concentration of disadvantage. Accordingly, therefore, with census Collection Districts (average (Sydney) 2006 population: 612) being rated too small and Local Government Areas (LGAs) too large (average (Sydney) 2006 population: 95,795), the ABS-defined suburb was selected as our unit of analysis. To place this in context, Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane contained 1725 suburbs in 2006, with their population averaging 5360. A suburb-level analysis has the advantage of being framed within a spatial unit having some intrinsic familiarity and meaning to residents and policymakers. This was particularly important for our study, since a later phase of the research (as reported elsewhere – see Cheshire et al., 2014) included qualitative interviews with local residents and stakeholders in chosen disadvantaged areas.

To address our first research question we developed a methodology to enable a suburb-level analysis of the ABS Socio-Economic Index for Areas – SEIFA – index. In tackling the second research question we performed a cluster analysis (CA) using relevant census-derived socio-economic indicators. An account of the precise methods developed here forms the main body of Sections

[3] This probably helps to account for the frequency of census tract-level analysis in the North American literature.