Is metropolitan sprawl bad for civic life? Evidence from three Norwegian cities.

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According to Robert Putnam (2000), the expansion of major cities into neighbouring communities is a major threat to America’s stock of social capital. With improved communications and the general availability of cars, it has become easier to sleep in a neighbouring community while spending one’s days in the city.

Commuting is, according to Putnam, bad for community life in a direct sense, as it takes time away from civic engagement. Furthermore, the spread of the city disrupts established community boundaries. In Putnam’s terms, the communities become less “well-defined and bounded” (2000), as citizens may feel as connected to the urban centre in which they work as to the community in which they live: “(...) [I]t is not simply time spent in the car itself, but also spatial fragmentation between home and workplace, that is bad for community life” (Putnam 2000:213-214). Putnam even claims that “each additional ten minutes in daily commuting time cuts involvement in community affairs by 10 per cent” (op.cit., 213). In Putnam’s analysis, the time displacement and spatial fragmentation caused by commuting is one of the main culprits behind the slump in America’s social capital that he claims to have identified.

Putnam’s ideas about metropolitan sprawl were developed in an exclusively American context. However, there is no reason to expect that the mechanisms he describes, i.e. time displacement and spatial fragmentation, are limited to the US; they should apply to other societies as well. If metropolitan sprawl has the deleterious consequences that Putnam claims, it is a pressing issue to identify whether this is a universal finding or an American idiosyncrasy.

The data stem from a comprehensive survey carried out in November 2007 in three Norwegian City Regions (Oslo, Bergen and Stavanger). The data material includes responses from 6,166 individuals residing in these three cities or in the surrounding municipalities (73 municipalities in total). The three cities are further divided into 30 urban districts. The data is supplemented by context information about the municipalities and urban districts, based on official statistics. The very large sample, the theoretical rationale of the survey and the structure of the data allow us to assess the sprawl hypothesis with a great deal of accuracy.

In the paper, we divide the respondents into five groups:

(1) Extra-urban commuters: People residing in municipalities adjacent to cities while working in the city (13% of sample/776 respondents).

(2) Extra-urban non-commuters: People residing and working in municipalities adjacent to cities (23%/1370).

(3) City dwellers: People living and working in the city (33%/1982).

(4) City commuters: People living in the city and working in adjacent municipalities (4%/240).

(5) Non-employed: People with no paid employment (27%/1622).

In light of Putnam’s thesis, we would expect the extra-urban commuters to (a) participate less in community affairs, (b) less actively involved in voluntary organizations and (c) feel less connected with their local communities compared to city dwellers and extra-urban non-commuters. This social isolation should also lead to (d) a drop in levels of social trust within this group.

The results show:
(a) With regard to involvement in local community affairs (taking part in or initiating a public meeting to discuss community affairs, participation in communal voluntary work, engagement in local community association), there are no differences between group 1 and 2 above. In fact, commuters are substantially more active than city dwellers (group 3), even though they report more frequently than others that they see inflexible and demanding work situation as a major obstacle to more community involvement.

(b) With regard to participation in voluntary organizations, there are no differences between groups 1-4, whether we measure nominal memberships or active participation. There are some minor variations with regard to the types of associations the different groups involve in: City dwellers are more often engaged in cooperative housing associations, while extra-urbanites are more involved in house owners’ associations and neighborhood improvement associations. Residents in extra-urban municipalities are more involved in associations related to traditional culture and work (religion and agriculture).

(c) With regard to feeling connected to the local community, commuters report that they feel slightly more connected to the street they live in, their neighborhoods and local areas than city dwellers do. They express a stronger sense of belonging to their immediate surroundings than city dwellers, who identify more strongly with the entire municipality (i.e. the city). This identification with the immediate physical surroundings echoes the types of associations they choose to get involved in (see (b)).

(d) There are no differences between the groups with regard to social trust.

The addition of individual and contextual control variables in multivariate regression analyses does not alter any of these findings.

In summary, the results give very little reason for concern with regard to the negative consequences of commuting. It does not seem to destroy social capital or civic engagement. Even though commuters express frustrations about excessive work demands, the spatial fragmentation and time displacement they experience do not preclude them from participating in and feeling connected to their local communities.