

A brief visit to a neighborhood induces the social attitudes of that neighborhood

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Spending as little as 45 minutes in a high-crime, deprived neighbourhood can have measurable effects on people's trust in others and their feelings of paranoia. In a new study, students who visited high crime neighbourhoods quickly developed a level of trust and paranoia comparable to the residents of that neighbourhood, and significantly different from that in more low-crime neighbourhoods. As a result, urban planners should carefully consider the psychological effects of the environment.

Researchers in the UK studied two [neighbourhoods](#) of the same city only a few kilometres apart, one economically deprived and relatively high in crime, and the other affluent and relatively low in crime. They initially surveyed the [residents](#) and found that the residents of the high-crime neighbourhood reported lower feelings of social [trust](#) and higher feelings of [paranoia](#) than the residents of the other neighbourhood. Then, in an effort to understand how these feelings had come to exist, they enrolled over 50 student volunteers (who were not from either neighbourhood) and bussed them to one or other neighbourhood at random. The volunteers, who did not know the purpose of the study, spent up to 45 minutes walking the streets and delivering envelopes to houses. Afterwards, the volunteers were also surveyed about their feelings of social trust and paranoia. Those sent to the disorderly neighbourhood reported lower trust and higher paranoia than those sent to the affluent neighbourhood. Moreover, even after such a brief visit, the visitors to a neighbourhood had become indistinguishable from the residents of that neighbourhood in terms of their levels of trust and paranoia.

The study, entitled "Being there: a brief visit to a neighbourhood induces the social attitudes of that neighbourhood" was published in the open access journal, *PeerJ*, on January 14th.

It was already known that living in a deprived area is associated with poorer [mental health](#) and a less trusting outlook. However, the previous correlational studies had not been able to establish causality: do people become less trusting as a response to the deprivation that surrounds them, or do people who were less trusting to start with tend to reside in more deprived areas? It was to try to address this question that the researchers came up with their random 'bussing' experiment. Since the volunteers were assigned to the neighbourhood at random, any differences in their attitudes after the visit would reflect the [psychological effects](#) of the experiences they had just had.

"We weren't surprised that the residents of our high-crime neighbourhood were relatively low in trust and high in paranoia", says lead researcher Daniel Nettle of Newcastle University. "That makes sense. What did surprise us though was that a very short visit to the neighbourhood appeared to have much the same effects on trust and paranoia as long-term residence there." The results suggest that people respond in real time to the sights and sounds of a neighbourhood – for example, broken windows, graffiti, litter, and razor-wire on houses – and that they use these cues to update their attitudes concerning how other people will behave. "It's a striking illustration of the extent to which our attitudes and our [feelings](#) are malleable and are powerfully influenced by the social environment that surrounds us on a day-to-day basis. Policy-makers, [urban planners](#), and citizens need to remember this. Improving the quality and security of the urban environment is not just a cosmetic luxury; it could have profound knock-on effects for city-dwellers' social relationships and mental health".

More information: Nettle D, Pepper GV, Jobling R, Schroeder KB.

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