

We are becoming segregated into young and old communities without realising

June 5 2017, by Albert Sabater, Elspeth Graham And Nissa Finney



Never the twain. Credit: M-SUR

Differences in political views between different age groups have been very apparent during the current UK election campaign. The polls are [showing](#) Labour's Jeremy Corbyn well ahead with young voters, for

example, while older voters are firmly backing the Conservatives under Theresa May. There were similarly marked differences in voting intention between age groups in the referendums over [EU membership](#) and [Scottish independence](#).

This comes on the back of a distinctive shift in the age make-up of different communities. We have just published [research](#) that shows that different parts of the UK are becoming more residentially segregated in terms of the age groups that live there. While ethnic and class [segregation](#) have long been topics of social and political concern, is it time we started worrying about age segregation, too?

When we analysed census data to investigate [residential segregation](#) between older (65+) and younger adults (24-40) across neighbourhoods, we found it has risen rapidly. Back in 1991, only 33 districts in England and Wales – 9.4% of the total – displayed what we consider to be moderate age segregation. (We rank segregation from a low of zero to a maximum of 100 and treat scores of 30-60 as moderate segregation.) By 2011, this had risen to 198 or 56.8% of the total. In other words, there is now less of an age mix within many neighbourhoods than in the past.

Not every district is equally affected. Age segregation tends to be higher in [rural areas](#), especially those that attract older retirees. The classic example is central Bedfordshire, slightly north of London.

Yet the largest increases are in urban areas, especially in former industrial cities in the north of England. For instance, age segregation has increased sharply in large cities such as Manchester and Leeds, plus smaller cities such as Preston and York. Cities in southern regions have also experienced increases, but more modestly (except in the east of England).

How to explain these changes? There are greater numbers of older

people thanks to the ageing population – and they have tended to move to the suburbs or remain either there or in rural areas. Meanwhile, young adults are increasingly concentrating in cities, thanks to job markets that prioritise them and a housing market that makes it unaffordable for many to make the traditional move out of town.

This is not only happening in the UK. We have seen the [same trend](#) of age segregation in the US, for instance, where the research has focused on segregation between 20-34 year olds and 60-plusers. In the 1990s, 37% of American county subdivisions experienced moderate age segregation. By 2010 it was 48%.

A worrying trend?

Like other forms of segregation, residential age segregation can have serious social consequences, fostering distrust, misunderstanding and stereotypical thinking. In the current climate of austerity, the potential for inter-generational conflict becomes greater still.

It can lead to increased competition between age groups for limited public and private resources to support the services and institutions that best meet their age-specific needs. It also means fewer opportunities for different age groups to share common goals.

Previous research [has pointed to](#) the need for communities where young, middle-aged and older people from all walks of life can get to know each other. Such communities are essential for building mutual respect and developing cooperative relationships.

Instead, there are definite signs of an "us-and-them" attitude that is potentially being exacerbated by communities with less of an age mix. A good example is housing, where some blame the older generation for frustrating the [ownership aspirations](#) of younger people by hanging on to

family housing. Not only is this finger-pointing socially divisive, it diverts attention from serious structural failures in the housing market.

Politicians make these problems worse by targeting manifesto promises at particular age groups and places. In the US presidential election, for example, the urban-rural divide [took centre stage](#). And in the current UK election, the latest Conservative policies have been accused of pitting both [town against country](#) and [young against old](#).

Since these divides [appear to be](#) affecting political outcomes around the world, such political moves are perhaps not surprising. But if age segregation keeps increasing, there is every chance they will get worse. It could pose a serious challenge to geographically organised representative democracy. It could have grave implications for one age group or the other – impeding care for the next generation, for instance.

What to do

There have been various local, national and international efforts in recent years to promote [age-friendly cities and communities](#) as a way to realise the benefits of inter-generational mixing. For instance, in cities such as [Manchester](#), [Newcastle and Brighton](#) [older people](#) play leading roles in local programmes to actively engage older and younger people in their communities. This can include everything from allocating chairs in shops to allow people to sit down to having "dementia-friendly" guides in public buildings.

Such efforts need to be extended – both for the benefit of the younger generation and to suburban and rural areas where the dominance of a particular age group has become the norm. Even then, it will take time for such initiatives to have an effect – not least because they currently tend to focus on individual engagement rather than making neighbourhoods attractive to diverse age groups.

You could make neighbourhoods more universally attractive in a number of ways. These could include: new housing developments with a mix of dwelling sizes, good service provision of primary schools and daycare centres within the same neighbourhoods, ensuring a safe urban environment, and providing greater accessibility to services for both older and younger people in rural areas.

Understanding and addressing the trends and consequences of residential age segregation is an important social challenge that needs to rise up the political agenda. Whatever the response, it must take care to avoid the narrative of "apocalyptic demography" that constantly pits one generation against another. Instead, we need to see these changing demographics as an opportunity to reconnect different [age groups](#) and shape society in a way that is more cohesive for all.

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