

Lost letter experiment suggests wealthy London neighborhoods are 'more altruistic'

August 15 2012

Neighbourhood income deprivation has a strong negative effect on altruistic behaviour when measured by a 'lost letter' experiment, according to new UCL research published today in *PLOS ONE*.

Researchers from UCL [Anthropology](#) used the lost letter technique to measure [altruism](#) across 20 London neighbourhoods by dropping 300 letters on the [pavement](#) and recording whether they arrived at their destination. The stamped letters were addressed by hand to a study author's home address with a gender neutral name, and were dropped face-up and during rain free weekdays.

The results show a strong negative effect of neighbourhood income deprivation on altruistic behaviour, with an average of 87% of letters dropped in the wealthier neighbourhoods being returned compared to only an average 37% return rate in poorer neighbourhoods.

Co-author Jo Holland said: "This is the first large scale study investigating cooperation in an [urban environment](#) using the lost letter technique. This technique, first used in the 1960s by the American [social psychologist](#) Stanley Milgram, remains one of the best ways of measuring truly altruistic behaviour, as returning the letter doesn't benefit that person and actually incurs the small hassle of taking the letter to a post box."

Co-author Professor Ruth Mace added: "Our study attempts to understand how the socio-economic characteristics of a neighbourhood

affect the likelihood of people in a neighbourhood acting altruistically towards a stranger. The results show a clear trend, with letters dropped in the poorest neighbourhoods having 91% lower odds of being returned than letters dropped in the wealthiest neighbourhoods. This suggests that those living in poor neighbourhoods are less inclined to behave altruistically toward their [neighbours](#)."

As well as measuring the number of letters returned, the researchers also looked at how other neighbourhood characteristics may help to explain the variation in altruistic behaviour – including ethnic composition and population density – but did not find them to be good predictors of lost letter return.

Corresponding author Antonio Silva said: "The fact that ethnic composition does not play a role on the likelihood of a letter being returned is particularly interesting, as other studies have suggested that ethnic mixing negatively affects social cohesion, but in our sampled London neighbourhoods this does not appear to be true.

"The level of altruism observed in a population is likely to vary according to its context. Our hypothesis that area level socio-economic characteristics could determine the levels of altruism found in individuals living in an area is confirmed by our results. Our overall findings replicate and expand on previous studies which use similar methodology.

"We show in this study that individuals living in [poor neighbourhoods](#) are less altruistic than individuals in wealthier neighbourhoods. However, the effect of income deprivation may be confounded by crime, as the poorer neighbourhoods tend to have higher rates crime which may lead to people in those neighbourhoods being generally more suspicious and therefore less likely to pick up a lost letter.

"Further research should focus on attempting to disentangle these two factors, possibly by comparing equally deprived neighbourhoods with different levels of crime. Although this study uses only one measure of altruism and therefore we should be careful in interpreting these findings, it does give us an interesting perspective on altruism in an urban context and provides a sound experimental model on which to base future studies."

More information: Lost Letter Measure of Variation in Altruistic Behaviour in 20 Neighbourhoods, *PLOS ONE*,
dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0043294

Provided by University College London

Citation: Lost letter experiment suggests wealthy London neighborhoods are 'more altruistic' (2012, August 15) retrieved 20 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-08-lost-letter-wealthy-london-neighborhoods.html>

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