

## Improving urban neighbourhoods for all: Don't rely on the middle classes

Professor Gary Bridge

### About the research

The middle classes are attracting increasing interest in urban and public policy. Urban policy has long advocated socially mixed neighbourhoods – as a way of breaking up concentrations of poverty and of bringing middle class skills and ‘voice’ into urban neighbourhoods (thereby improving their prospects). Yet at the same time there are concerns about the middle classes retreating into more exclusive, sometimes gated, communities and becoming segregated from the rest of the city.

Having middle class people living in socially mixed neighbourhoods is considered to be beneficial for policy, both in terms of helping poorer neighbourhoods and reducing neighbourhood segregation. But is this position justified?

Here we report the findings of a large comparative study of middle class residents living in a range of neighbourhood types (from commuter villages, suburbs, gated communities to gentrifying urban neighbourhoods) across Paris and London. The study examined whether the middle classes are good for social mix.

**This research examines the extent to which the middle classes engage in social mix and whether doing so brings benefits to all urban residents.**

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### Policy implications

- **For neighbourhoods:** Middle class voice is strong in socially mixed neighbourhoods, but neighbourhood advocacy and activity is selective and satisfies selective middle class interests and aspirations. Policy should not assume that middle class ‘voice’ will benefit all residents of socially mixed neighbourhoods.
- **For schools:** Controlling the peer group of their children is the top priority for middle class parents in both socially mixed and less mixed neighbourhoods. This carries more importance in middle class school selection than performance league tables, which raises doubts about the effectiveness of league tables in school choice policy.
- **For childcare:** Childcare costs and workplace norms act as a disincentive to full-time employment, even for skilled professional middle class women. More affordable childcare would likely reverse this trend.
- **For housing:** Family inheritance (‘the bank of Mum and Dad’) now plays a significant role in access to housing. It is increasingly only the wealthier fractions of the middle classes that can help their children in this way. This is likely to increase inequalities in the housing market and segregation in urban neighbourhoods.

## Key findings

- Globalisation has been accompanied by an increasing divergence and fracturing of the middle classes.
- Attitudes to social mix vary across neighbourhoods but all point to a sense that the middle classes distinguish and distance themselves from others.
- Neighbourhood location influences attitudes and activities of middle-class residents across the cities - there are increasingly distinct fractions based around lifestyle and cultural differences. Neighbourhood itself is also used as a form of social distinction, with a concern about being with 'people like us', especially when it comes to schooling.
- There is a strong gender distinction in the balancing of home/work responsibilities that cuts across different fractions of the middle class in contrasting types of neighbourhood. Women are predominantly responsible for caring/household work in all locations studied.
- There are generational differences in the fortunes and aspirations of the middle classes and an increasing concern about downward social mobility for the next generation. This leads to intense competition over schooling, a greater role for inheritance in housing trajectories and concern of middle class parents that their children will be unable to live in the the sorts of neighbourhoods they themselves have lived in.



## Further information

For further reading on this topic please see:

Jackson E, Benson M, 'Neither 'Deepest, Darkest Peckham', nor 'Run of the Mill' East Dulwich: the middle class and their 'others' in an inner London neighbourhood', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* [available at <http://bit.ly/1khirZf>].

Benson M, Bridge G, Wilson D (2014) 'School choice in Paris and London - A comparison of middle-class strategies', *Social Policy and Administration* [available at <http://bit.ly/1oN0zJa>].

Benson M, Jackson, E, (2013) 'Place-making and place maintenance: Practices of place and belonging among the middle classes', *Sociology* 47(4): 793-809 [available at <http://bit.ly/1amYpeH>].

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