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

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 (https://peerj.com/), 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”.

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Abstract (from the article)

There are differences between human groups in social behaviours and the attitudes that underlie them, such as trust. However, the psychological mechanisms that produce and reproduce this variation are not well understood. In particular, it is not clear whether assimilation to the social culture of a group requires lengthy socialization within that group, or can be more rapidly and reversibly evoked by exposure to the group's environment and the behaviour of its members. Here, we report the results of a two-part study in two neighbourhoods of a British city, one economically deprived with relatively high crime, and the other affluent and lower in crime. In the first part of the study, we surveyed residents and found that the residents of the deprived neighbourhood had lower levels of social trust and higher levels of paranoia than the residents of the affluent neighbourhood. In the second part, we experimentally transported student volunteers who resided in neither neighbourhood to one or the other, and had them walk around delivering questionnaires to houses. We surveyed their trust and paranoia, and found significant differences according to which neighbourhood they had been sent to. The differences in the visitors mirrored the differences seen in the residents, with visitors to the deprived neighbourhood reporting lower social trust and higher paranoia than visitors to the affluent one. The magnitudes of the neighbourhood differences in the visitors, who only spent up to 45 min in the locations, were nearly as great as the magnitudes of those amongst the residents. We discuss the

relevance of our findings to differential psychology, neighbourhood effects on social outcomes, and models of cultural evolution.