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by Mark Easton BBC Home Editor

Community life in Britain has weakened substantially over the past 30 years, according to research commissioned by the BBC.

Life in UK 'has become lonelier'

Analysis of census data reveals how neighbourhoods in every part of the UK have become more socially fragmented. The study assesses the health of a community by looking at how rooted people are in their neighbourhood. Academics created "loneliness indices", to identify where people had a "feeling of not belonging".

Substantial changes

The study ranks places using a formula based on the proportion of people in an area who are single, those who live alone, the numbers in private rented accommodation and those who have lived there for less than a year. The higher the proportion of people in those categories, the less rooted the community, according to social scientists. They refer to it as the level of "anomie" or the "feeling of not belonging".

Professor Daniel Dorling, University of Sheffield, who headed the research team at the University of Sheffield, said the measures could also be described as "loneliness indices".

Comparing the figures from the 1971 census with those in 2001 reveals substantial change.

Every region in the UK, broadly defined by a BBC local radio areas, has seen its communities become less rooted. Census figures for Northern Ireland in 1971 were unavailable but later census data reveals that this trend is reflected here too.

"Even the weakest communities in 1971 were stronger than any community now," says Professor Dorling. The researchers conclude that the increase in anomie weakens the "social glue" of communities. The result, they suggest, is that neighbourhoods are likely to be less trusting and more fearful.

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The local radio area with the strongest communities on this measure is Stoke-on-Trent. Edinburgh has the weakest communities.

The data allows analysis at neighbourhood level. The locality with the shallowest community roots is Holyrood in Edinburgh. Other places scoring poorly include Headingley in Leeds, the Hyde Park area of London and the university area of Cardiff.

One key factor in reducing the sense of belonging in a community is having a large student population.

The neighbourhoods revealed as having the deepest roots are the Bramhall area of Stockport in Greater Manchester, Charnwood West near Leicester, Sefton on Merseyside, Upminster in east London and Washington in Sunderland.

However, 97% of communities in the UK have become more socially fragmented over the past three decades.

"These trends may be linked to higher likelihoods of fearfulness because we are less likely to see and therefore understand each others' lives," Professor Dorling said. "The polarisation and segregation processes may also lead to stronger feelings of isolation."

The causes of social fragmentation are linked to mobility.

Increased wealth and improved access to transport has made it easier for people to move for work, for retirement, for schools, for a new life.

The decline in marriage, increasing divorce, immigration and a growing student population are also said to be contributory factors.

The areas which have seen the greatest change to community life have also been mapped.

London has been substantially affected with large-scale immigration thought to have had a big impact on traditional neighbourhoods. The east of Scotland has also experienced a significant weakening in its communities, driven, in part, by the expansion in further and higher education. Nottinghamshire has been badly affected. One theory is that once tight-knit colliery communities have been damaged by the decline in the coal industry. The South West has also seen a substantial social fragmentation. The rise in the number of holiday homes in the region has been blamed for undermining community life.