

EVALUATION OF SOCIAL IMPACT: A SUGGESTED APPROACH

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## SUMMARY

In recent years, the investigation of the effects of highway improvements on the social structure existing in the chosen highway corridor has become a necessary part of the transportation planning process. The environmental impact statement, as required by the 1970 Federal Aid Highway Act, stipulates that the social effects of the proposed highway on a neighborhood or community be studied and that adverse effects be kept to a minimum. Of extreme importance in the planning and eventual construction of highways, then, is assurance of only minimal disruption of the surrounding social entities such as existing neighborhoods and communities.

At the beginning of this study it was assumed that the gathering of impact data must be predicated upon an ability to define the entity involved or at least to classify it. It was hypothesized that types of neighborhoods and communities could be identified and typologized according to their expected reaction to the impact of highway development. However, a review of the literature revealed that such an approach was inadequate since the variables encountered would be infinite. Therefore, the authors decided to investigate several social units which were hypothesized to take on the appearance of a social group that is often termed a "neighborhood." The results of background research indicated that a singular set of methods and a problem directed research design would be considerably more informative and flexible for the purpose of impact evaluation than would the establishment of a series of residential categories.

Both obtrusive and unobtrusive research measures were used to gain a working knowledge of the social groups. The success attained in using these measures to determine the neighborhood qualities of a residential area demonstrates the need for utilizing a combination of techniques in impact evaluation studies.



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BACKGROUND

In order to provide a background for the development of the definitions and the working model, both of which were utilized in this pilot study on social impact, certain basic concepts and their implications must be set forth. While numerous perspectives have been taken in other such studies, the following discussion relates the considerations thought to be the most important to highway planners.

The topic of this research itself (the social\* impact of highway construction) suggests several points for initial attention. First, the study is obviously dealing with people in groups. Second, the word "impact" connotes a diachronic emphasis in the study, which may be viewed in terms of social stability and change. Third, the fact that highways occupy ribbons of land, connecting and dividing physical areas, implies that a territorial aspect is involved.

In order to account for the above factors it was felt that the definitions and models should combine them into a single operational set. The combining of all these factors simplifies the study and understanding of social groups. The categorization of phenomena, it was felt, should be avoided whenever possible, since it can often distort or desensitize the analytical devices being utilized.

In attempting to identify and define the social unit most adversely affected by highway construction, many traditional definitions of community and neighborhood were evaluated. While most of them provided valuable insights into the nature of these units, there was such wide variability among them that almost no completely common ground was afforded. The definitions for community were synthesized into the following general descriptive statement: A community is a self-sustaining social system occupying a local area, containing a variety

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\*The term "social" will be used throughout this discussion in its most general sense, unless specified otherwise. That is, it is used to denote the complex whole of human organization and interaction, including: the family, ideology and religion, status and class, economic and political activity, and interpersonal relations.

of formal institutions, public services and employment, autonomous political representation, and having an independent identity. Neighborhood, on the other hand, was described most frequently in the following terms: A neighborhood is a primary social group consisting of mutually interrelating inhabitants of a residential area who share a common identity and are a sociologically homogeneous entity.

It was decided that for this study the smaller, personally interacting and socially similar neighborhood unit would be the more appropriate focus. The independence and stability of the larger community were recognized as providing for it a flexibility and resilience under conditions of external change. Furthermore, its physical size was seen as a major factor contributing to its continuity.

The neighborhood, however, is an ordinarily vulnerable and quite frequently brittle entity, because of its relatively small physical size, the absence of formal organization, its economic and political dependence on the larger polity, and its inadaptability to the modern American lifestyle. The last named characteristic is a result of the fact that neighborhood cohesion and identity are determined primarily by spatial boundaries and ideological unity, both of which suffer from the effects of physical disruption and the mobility of the inhabitants. The neighborhood is not self-maintaining (as is a community), yet there are often more common ties here than in the community, and much more intimate overall interplay. The residents tend to define their neighborhood in terms of major streets, and travel within it is often done by bicycle or walking. Further, the neighborhood is usually thought of as a part of a larger community.

For the purposes of this study neighborhood was defined as a cohesive social unit characterized by close residential proximity, some form of identification exclusive of elements outside this proximity, and regular social interaction on a personal level.

#### PURPOSE

In the preparation of environmental impact statements, perhaps the most difficult aspect which must be assessed is the effect of highway development on residential groups. Social impact may involve the fragmentation of established local groups or decreases in group cohesion due to a disturbance to the neighborhood and the community.

In order to determine whether a highway section fragments or disturbs an established neighborhood or community, one must first determine the normative character of that unit. Then that unit must be analyzed to derive variables which are representative of this nature or character. It is necessary that a method or methods be established which will evaluate real situations in terms of these variables.

The study outlined here sought to meaningfully describe social units for these purposes. More specifically, the study was initially intended to derive definitions for the social units which are commonly referred to as neighborhoods. The definitions were not intended to be generally applicable for any situation, but rather to be appropriate for use in highway planning. They would specifically be tailored for use in evaluating the social impact of highways in the preparation of environmental impact statements.

Since numerous research methods have been developed in the social sciences — including interviews, statistical surveys, questionnaires, and participant observations — there are many alternatives one may use in the acquisition and analysis of data. The primary consideration is, of course, efficient alignment of methods toward specific goals. This may be achieved most economically by the construction of operational models. This type of conceptual scheme provides proper direction to the ensuing application of method, and relates the results of the study to a larger theoretical or pragmatic context. In light of these points, a problem-oriented model was developed for this study.

## METHODOLOGY

There are many ways to study social groups. They are classified under two large headings, obtrusive measures and unobtrusive measures. The unobtrusive measures do not require the cooperation of a respondent while obtrusive measures often require a great deal. Several types of unobtrusive measures were employed in this research.

Archival data (records, public documents, etc.) were studied to determine housing values, rental to owner ratios, housing age, mobility rate, number of children occupying an area, number of elderly occupying an area, occupation types, and the like. It was hypothesized that similar housing values, a high percentage of homeowners, low mobility rates, a large proportion of children or elderly citizens, and like occupation status would be conducive to neighborhood cohesiveness, interdependence, and sense of neighborhood identification. However, as is often the case in studies pursued by unobtrusive methods, the large amount of demographic information accumulated accounted for few of the behavior variables which were being sought. (While this type of data gathering is frequently used, it was found to be not often reliable as a predictor of social cohesion.)

Observation of the physical characteristics of the area was found to be very informative. In the case of the neighborhood study, aerial photos and maps were used to detect physical boundaries which might determine the movement or nonmovement of individuals. On-site observations were made to confirm this information and provide additional details. Further, pictures of dwellings in certain geographical areas were taken and compared, since it had been hypothesized that likeness of dwelling structures would promote a sense of identity within a neighborhood. On-site observations also revealed obvious instances of social interaction (i. e., borrowing and lending, "over the fence" conversations, visitations, car pools, social gatherings, etc.). It was discovered that patterns of interaction, either within the study area or by neighborhood residents with the outside, could not be reliably determined without extended observations throughout the year. Therefore, these data were admitted as supplementary rather than substantial.

Obtrusive measures ordinarily utilize the interview or questionnaire as research tools. In this study a free interview form of personal contact was used in which various individuals living in a local area were chosen and requested to discuss freely their attitudes about and behavior within their immediate environment. The type of data gathered by this method was much more reliable than that gathered by unobtrusive measures, for several reasons. Obviously, knowledge of the social behavior and values of the inhabitants of an

area can best be gained through communications with those inhabitants. This is especially true in light of the close parallels between what people think (attitudes and values) about their environment and how they act (social and individual behavior) within it. The existence of a neighborhood and its exemplification in neighborliness rely greatly upon the residents' conceptual images of their mutual social and physical environment, and their respective behaviors according to these images.

## CASE STUDIES

The methodology developed was employed in case studies of selected areas in Virginia. Usually the areas selected were adjacent to proposed future highway construction projects since data already gathered by the Department on these projects could be utilized. Described here are two typical cases which at first appeared to be very similar in nature. In the final analysis, however, they were indeed quite different and served as excellent tests of the proposed method.

### Case #1

The first area studied was near Chesapeake. This area is adjacent to the proposed construction of Route 464 and consists of eight one-story frame dwellings. An on-site observation of the dwellings was made in order to determine some of the characteristics of the physical setting. The area is bounded on the west by a bare, undeveloped area and the Norfolk & Portsmouth Belt Line Railroad tracks, on the north by the same tracks, on the east by Bainbridge Road, and on the south by another undeveloped area. It was noted that all of the dwellings were structurally very similar. Assessment records were examined to determine the age and assessed value of the dwellings as well as the length of occupancy of the current occupants. Upon investigating these documents it was found that the average age of the dwellings was 30 years (all were built around the same time), assessed values were almost identical for all eight, all were owner — occupied and the occupancy turnover rate was very low (i. e., most of the dwellings had had only one occupant).

An examination of the city directory indicated that most of the occupants of the eight dwellings were over 50 years of age, white, and a few were retired. These are some of the many factors that had led to the surmise that these eight dwellings constituted a cohesive unit which could be termed a neighborhood.

Upon the completion of the document search, the site was again visited and the area activity was observed for several hours. Although social activity in the area between the occupants appeared minimal, it was suspected that many of the occupants were employed during the day and that there probably was a great deal of social activity after working hours and on weekends. To check out this suspicion, a visit was made to a small, privately owned restaurant directly across the street from the case study area. The proprietress was questioned concerning the makeup of the case study area — friendship patterns, neighborhood organization structure, opinion of territorial boundaries, attitudes about the surrounding community, and the degree of neighborliness which existed. The proprietress spoke with authority due to the fact that she was an occupant of one of the dwellings. Several customers in the establishment also joined in the conversation and expressed many ideas concerning some of the concepts that were being discussed with the proprietress.

These discussions revealed that the early suppositions about the area were false. The interviews disclosed that social interaction among the inhabitants was absent. Not only did the inhabitants not socialize, they had no desire to do so. When asked if they would be at all concerned if forced to relocate, those interviewed expressed veritable unconcern over that possibility and also said that they felt that the other inhabitants would voice the same sentiments.

The experience gained by the researchers in this first case was invaluable and immediately revealed that things are not always as they may appear. This case study suggested the necessity of using two kinds of research techniques. It was decided that the next case study would be more structured and intense than this first one.

### Case #2

The second of the two cases involved an area which is said to be bisected and partially removed by an expressway. Aerial photographs showed that the area consisted of about 80 or so dwellings of similar type. An on-site examination revealed that the area is landlocked by the contrasting commercial use of the areas surrounding it. This 2 1/2 block wide by 5 block long area has ceased to expand or to increase in population density for several years. It is bounded on the southeast by the Norfolk and Western Railway and a barren ravine which is unsuitable for construction purposes. Colonial Avenue (a main thoroughfare) and the Towers Shopping Center border the area on the northwest. Brandon Avenue (another main thoroughfare) borders the area on the northeast while Broadway Street and several commercial establishments border it on the southwest.

An examination of local assessment records provided the needed information concerning the age of the homes, the length of the occupancy of the current occupant, whether the dwelling was owner or tenant occupied, and the assessed value of each dwelling. The documents showed that the average age of the homes was 19 years and the mean turnover rate was 12.75 years, which indicated a highly stable local group. Fifty percent of the dwellings had had only one owner and the mean fair market value of the homes was \$13,000. Next, census data on the area were checked and they indicated that a large number of children lived in the area. This was also substantiated by an on-site observation. The population in the area was white, and the average household size was 3.5 people. It was also noticed that the dwellings were constructed on approximately 1/4 acre lots with easy access to both the street and the neighbor living directly to the rear.

It was hypothesized that the area (hereafter to be referred to as the Sanford Avenue area) was a social unit with a potential to be greatly disrupted by any change in the existing setting. It was felt that a bisection in the form of highway takings would totally obliterate the social unit and end all forms of interplay and social activities which might exist.

Several of the inhabitants were interviewed to gain firsthand information on the social makeup of the area. Included in the persons interviewed were two waitresses in a nearby restaurant, an auto mechanic, a self-employed businessman, a bus driver, and a paper boy — all of whom had lived in the Sanford Avenue area for most of their lives. Questions were asked about both the area and the people living in it (see Appendix B). The information obtained from the interviews proved to be more valuable than that obtained from the documents reviewed (see Appendix C). The responses showed that the Sanford Avenue area was

indeed an interacting primary social group which could be classified as a neighborhood. It appeared that the inhabitants of the area all knew one another to some extent. It was also found that the area contained several small "neighborhood organizations" (a Girl Scout troop, a bowling league, car pools, etc.). Moreover, each interviewee also described the area in which he or she lived with respect to the boundaries that had been ascertained earlier. In short, the people themselves defined their living area as a neighborhood. In this case study, the hypothesis formulated after the unobtrusive measures were used was confirmed by the data gathered by the obtrusive measures.

## FINDINGS

Case study one then shows an example of the obtrusive measure data disproving an hypothesis while case study two shows how obtrusive measures were used to confirm an hypothesis. It was learned then and should be stressed here that no hypothesis concerning the existence of a neighborhood can be reliably tested unless both types of research measures are utilized.

As was earlier stated, the team sought to establish a valid model and operational definition for the term neighborhood or community which would be of use to highway planners in investigating the social impact of highways on those entities. No universal definition for either of these two entities was found. However, a functional difference between the two types of units was found along with valid methods of examining the social impact upon each.

Highway construction can affect both a community and a neighborhood unit. It is probable that while the construction of a highway facility will disrupt a neighborhood unit considerably, it will oftentimes have only a minimal social effect on the community at large. Since the community is a self-maintaining entity and the neighborhood is not, any disruption or change in everyday activity can be absorbed more easily by the community than by the neighborhood. In the case of the neighborhood, the possibility exists that the unit may be totally obliterated if care is not taken to minimize disruption. It is apparent that the disruption of a neighborhood should be of primary and significant concern at the route-location level of planning. Consideration must be given, therefore, as to whether or not this degree of impact can be justified. In controlling the social impact of highways in urban areas, the aim should be to minimize the disruption of neighborhood units.

There are several variables which can be studied as indicators of the degree of neighborliness in an area. Car pools, scout troops, bowling leagues, and the like are all suggestive of intimate social interplay. A high proportion of women and children seems to lead to a high degree of neighborliness. The same is true for areas with a large percentage of owner occupied dwellings as opposed to tenant occupied dwellings. Further, working class neighborhoods tend to be unified more closely in everyday life than those of other socioeconomic classes. Finally, the average length of resident tenure is positively associated with the degree of neighborhood cohesion.

A tightly knit neighborhood unit is a walking area occupied most likely by persons of similar income and educational background. These individuals normally interact with each other daily and engage in some joint activities. The unit may be influenced by visual boundaries such as streams, railroad tracks, traffic arteries, or change in building types, but the functional boundaries are ultimately conceptual rather than physical.

The variables selected as providing a reliable measure of the conformity to the operational definition established in the study are listed below. They encompass a wide range of topics, some pertaining to demographic, economic, and other types of strictly documentary information. These may serve only as supportive evidence, and cannot be taken independently as predictive of the "neighborhood" quality that is being sought. Others pertain to information obtained through obtrusive measures, and should form the foundation of each study of social impact.

Primary (obtrusive) factors:

1. Number of close friends in neighborhood
2. Number of acquaintances in neighborhood
3. Kinds and participation in neighborhood organizations and activities
4. Opinion of neighborhood boundaries
5. Local travel on foot
6. Opinion of neighborhood change over time
7. Specific instances of neighborhood unity
8. Attitudes about surrounding community
9. Neighborhood participation in community affairs

Supportive (unobtrusive) factors:

1. Age of houses
2. Assessed and market value of houses
3. Length of tenure
4. No. of owners per house (turnover)
5. Percentages owned and rented
6. Size of household
7. No. of children, age of children
8. Income per household
9. Occupations
10. Ethnic, racial, linguistic factors
11. Physical boundaries and characteristics
12. Accessibility to outside
13. Institutionalized organizations (if any)
14. Business and/or commercial enterprise (present & potential)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The two methods of data gathering utilized in this study were unobtrusive measures (archival data, observations, physical elements) and obtrusive measures (questionnaires and interviews). Both methods have limitations and both have distinct advantages. Unobtrusive measures supply demographic data and will permit statistical summaries which may be used as supplementary evidence and as general indicators for some trends in neighborhood interaction. Obtrusive measures supply attitudinal and behavioral data, and are ordinarily more valid, since information can be gained firsthand from the constituents of a unit. However, it is also possible that interviews or questionnaires themselves might introduce bias into the social setting by creating as well as measuring attitudes. In fact, they may elicit atypical and unreliable responses, since they are limited to those individuals who will cooperate. In consideration of the above discussion, the following recommendations are offered:

1. It is advantageous to study social impact using a collection of methods combined to compensate for the weaknesses inherent in each individual method. Therefore, the study of the disruptive effects of highways on the neighborhood should be carried out by utilizing both obtrusive and unobtrusive measures. In addition, studies of social impact should be conducted or overseen by an individual with both a background in social science and experience in survey research.

2. Social impact studies should be concerned with the neighborhood rather than the community because the neighborhood is the more delicate of the two. The community can more easily withstand disruption than the neighborhood while still maintaining itself as a unit. The possibility exists that the neighborhood could be obliterated by a project which might only minimally affect the larger community.
3. A sociological survey utilizing a standard questionnaire or interview schedule should be developed which would aid the Department in recognizing the attitudes and desires of neighborhood residents with respect to transportation facilities. This instrument should also be able to provide the Department with a knowledge of the interaction, interdependence and cohesion within the neighborhood.
4. The social impact of highway development on neighborhoods should be incorporated within the larger scheme of environmental impact study. It fits logically into this context since social effects are most strongly felt on the neighborhood level, while economic and transportation network considerations are more efficiently viewed at the community or regional level. Thus, each type of local organization is affected differently and is best evaluated for highway purposes on its own terms. Moreover, to be most useful, social studies should be initiated as early as possible in the planning sequence.

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IMPACT EVALUATION FORM

Project #: \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluation Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location:

Block: \_\_\_\_\_

Lot Nos.: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

County: \_\_\_\_\_

Natural Features and Boundaries

N-NE \_\_\_\_\_

E-SE \_\_\_\_\_

S-SW \_\_\_\_\_

W-NW \_\_\_\_\_

Man-made Features and Boundaries

N-NE \_\_\_\_\_

E-SE \_\_\_\_\_

S-SW \_\_\_\_\_

W-NW \_\_\_\_\_

Historical or Other Notable Features

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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Land Use

# of Lots: \_\_\_\_\_ Mean Lot Size: \_\_\_\_\_

# of Residences: \_\_\_\_\_ # of other Buildings: \_\_\_\_\_

Housing

# Single Family Owner: \_\_\_\_\_ % # Single Family Rental \_\_\_\_\_ %

# Multiple Family including Owner: \_\_\_\_\_ %

# Multiple Family Rental: \_\_\_\_\_ %

Age of Houses: Mean \_\_\_\_\_ Median \_\_\_\_\_

Assessed Value of Houses: Mean \_\_\_\_\_ Median \_\_\_\_\_ Range \_\_\_\_\_

	WHITE			BLACK			OTHER			TOTALS		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
0-18												
19-59												
60 & Over												
Totals												

Adult Education Level: Mean \_\_\_\_\_ Median \_\_\_\_\_ Std. Dev. \_\_\_\_\_

# \_\_\_\_\_ % # \_\_\_\_\_ % # \_\_\_\_\_ % # \_\_\_\_\_ %  
HS \_\_\_\_\_ % HS \_\_\_\_\_ % S. Coll. \_\_\_\_\_ % CD \_\_\_\_\_ %

# \_\_\_\_\_ % # \_\_\_\_\_ %  
Grd. Ex. \_\_\_\_\_ % Grd. & P \_\_\_\_\_ %

Total Family Income: Mean \_\_\_\_\_ Median \_\_\_\_\_ Range \_\_\_\_\_ Std. Dev. \_\_\_\_\_

Persons Per Household: Mean \_\_\_\_\_ Median \_\_\_\_\_ Range \_\_\_\_\_ Std. Dev. \_\_\_\_\_

Length of Residence (Present Owner): Mean \_\_\_\_\_ Median \_\_\_\_\_

Range \_\_\_\_\_ Std. Dev. \_\_\_\_\_

Turnover (# of owners per home): Mean \_\_\_\_\_ Median \_\_\_\_\_  
 Range \_\_\_\_\_ Std. Dev. \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Pref: Prot. \_\_\_\_\_ % Cath. \_\_\_\_\_ %  
 Jew \_\_\_\_\_ % Other \_\_\_\_\_ %

Automobiles per Family: Mean \_\_\_\_\_ Median \_\_\_\_\_  
 # \_\_\_\_\_ % # \_\_\_\_\_ %

Mode of travel to work by Persons Employed: Walk \_\_\_\_\_ %  
 Drive or Ride \_\_\_\_\_ %  
 Total \_\_\_\_\_ #

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE INTERVIEW FORM

1. Do you consider your local residential area to be a neighborhood?
2. What do you consider, if any, to be the boundaries of your neighborhood?  
Are these commonly recognized by most of your neighbors?
3. To what locations do you normally walk from your home? How often?
4. Do you consider most of the members of your neighborhood to be "your kind of people"? If not, how are they different?
5. In your opinion, does your present residential location have historical or other special value?
6. Do you ever visit or associate in public with any of your neighbors?  
If so, how often? — and how many different neighbors?
7. Are you satisfied with the area in which you live?  
If so, why? If not, why?
8. If you have children living in your home, are you satisfied with your area as a place to bring up children?
9. Are you a member of any neighborhood or community clubs or organizations? Which ones? In your opinion, are most residents in your area interested in neighborhood affairs? Community affairs? Are many of them members of the same or other organizations as you? If so, which ones?
10. How many residents of your area would you consider to be close friends?
11. How many residents of your area do you know?
12. In your opinion, has your neighborhood changed much in the past five years? If yes, how much? In what ways?

## APPENDIX C

SOURCES FOR SOCIAL IMPACT DATA

Aerial photos, planning maps  
City Directory  
H. E. W.  
H. U. D.  
\*Lusk Real Estate Reports  
\*Planning Offices  
\*Redevelopment & Housing Authority  
Right-of-Way files — Highway Department  
Tax Assessor's Office  
\*Urban Renewal Data  
U. S. Census Bureau Data (Block Data)

\*only limited areas covered

