

Civic involvement in deprived communities: A longitudinal study of England

Franco Bonomi Bezzo^{1,2,3}  | Anne-Marie Jeannet¹

¹University of Milan, Milan, Italy

²Institut national d'études démographiques, Paris, France

³Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, Cape Town, South Africa

Correspondence

Franco Bonomi Bezzo.

Email: franco.bonomibezzo@outlook.com

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Abstract

This study aims to understand how community material deprivation is related to associational membership amongst neighbourhood residents. We posit that aside from personal characteristics and willingness to engage, experiences of neighbourhood deprivation are strongly correlated with how much people devote themselves to associational membership. We identify three mechanisms through which community deprivation can determine individual participation in political, civic, and work voluntary associations: social cohering, norms of obligation, and activated dissatisfaction. We link individual panel data from Understanding Society from 2010 to 2019 with the English Index of Multiple Deprivation at the neighbourhood level. This study finds that neighbourhood deprivation is associated with lower norms of civic obligation which, in turn, lowers a person's propensity for engagement. Individuals with low income and education are less likely to participate in voluntary associations in the first place, therefore the contextual role of neighbourhood deprivation exerts a further external negative pressure on civic participation. We find that membership in political organizations is an exception whereby it is positively associated with neighbourhood deprivation. The results imply that given the many economic and social capital benefits of associational involvement (Putnam, 2000), collective deprivation

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can produce an additive pattern of economic disadvantage which is reinforced through a lack of social participation.

KEYWORDS

community, deprivation, England, membership, social cohesion

1 | INTRODUCTION

Community deprivation puts an economic and social strain on civic life when individuals are denied ordinary conditions. Deprived communities are characterized by a persistent scarcity of material resources. Yet, a person's own material lack is often further compounded by a lack of vital social resources in their neighbourhood context. It is well established that a community's material deprivation can influence the ways that residents interact with one another (Jahoda et al., 1933; Wilson, 2011). Previous evidence finds that individuals living in deprived areas feel isolated and disenfranchised as they come to view the society around them as 'forbidding' (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2004).

The civic life of deprived communities is still understudied and there is still much to learn about involvement in voluntary associations under conditions of material scarcity. Associational membership is a form of *Gemeinschaft* that provides a beneficial resource for communities to "support the normative order (...), help distribute power at the grass roots level, function as service centres, and reinforce important values" (Babchuk & Booth, 1969 p. 31). The term associational membership refers to individuals who are voluntary members of a social group that is "relatively freely organized to pursue mutual or personal interests or to achieve common goals, usually non-profit in nature" (Scott, 1957, p. 316). Voluntary associations are formal groups and are distinct from informal social groups like gangs or cliques. The number of groups can be numerous and can be organized around a variety of activities such as youth groups, hobby groups, co-operative or advocacy groups, and cultural groups. Throughout this article, we use the terms 'civic involvement' and 'associational membership' interchangeably.

Robert Putnam's landmark book 'Bowling Alone' brought the study of voluntary membership to the fore by considering its role in fostering social capital and as a way to gauge "the density of social connectedness" (Putnam, 2000, p. 96). While Putnam's main argument is that associational membership is trending downwards in all social strata since the 1950s, he acknowledges that "financial worries and economic troubles have a profoundly depressing effect on social involvement" (Putnam, 2000, p. 192). Yet the book aims to explain a general and ubiquitous trend in American society and it does not tackle the extraordinary circumstances of civic involvement in deprived communities.

There is a long tradition of investigating how economic scarcity influences formal political participation such as voting (Beramendi & Anderson, 2008), but less is known about participation in the *res publica*. The social context where individuals live can determine how much they actively engage in politics (Dacombe & Parvin, 2021) as well as the extent to which individuals participate in local associations (Huckfeldt, 1979). Some qualitative studies have documented lower participation in voluntary associations in impoverished areas (Small, 2002; Wilson, 2011) but little is still known about the mechanisms through which this works. Small (2002)'s ethnographic study of deprived areas reveals the complexity of participation in community associations and finds that poverty imposes structural constraints on participation. This evidence of structural constraints would indicate that low participation in deprived areas is not simply due to a concentration of individuals who lack sufficient resources or education to form social organizations. Instead, there is reason to see the concentration of deprivation as reinforcing group-level scarcity in social life.

In his seminal study of Buffalo (US), Huckfeldt (1979) found that political engagement is more strongly determined by the affluence of the social context than by individual characteristics. Huckfeldt (1979) was among the first to empirically find that aside from personal circumstances, what matters the most are the individual characteristics of

local neighbours. We aim to build this work, postulating that it is not only the aggregation of other deprived people in a surrounding area which matters but that deprivation creates a socio-ecology with different incentive structures for engaging in civically.

Recent literature on deprivation tends to accept that it is a multidimensional problem (Lister, 2004) which is frequently emphasised by the lack of associational life (Dacombe, 2021). Under this perspective, the quality and density (or lack thereof) of social life in deprived areas occurs under conditions of scarcity that reinforce its material disadvantages. Indeed, neighbourhoods and communities exert an important influence on citizens' engagement in civic life (Buck, 2001). According to Buck (2001), deprived neighbourhoods have weak social infrastructures and patterns of ghettoization that foster the reproduction of residents' social and perceptive isolation from more affluent and connected communities.

In the last decades, numerous cross-disciplinary studies have investigated the effect of the 2008–2009 recession on individuals' participation (Custer et al., 2019; Kisby, 2010; Lim & Laurence, 2015; Lindsey, 2013; Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012; North, 2011; Uitermark, 2015). The public discourse tended to emphasize the joys of old-fashioned neighbourliness' and community belonging in the hard times of economic recessions (The Telegraph, 2009). Yet the results of the academic literature, typically based either on case studies or on specific forms of civic engagement, are quite heterogenous and do not provide a conclusive answer. Lim and Laurence (2015) find that both formal and informal forms of volunteering overall declined in the UK during the recession, even more so in economically disadvantaged communities. Their results confirm previous findings on the Great Depression in different contexts, such as the Austrian case of Marienthal (Jahoda et al., 1933) to London (Bakke, 1933).

In the United States Putnam (2000) argues that, overall, besides individual circumstances, macro-economic dynamics unevenly affect civic involvement in different communities or areas. The resources available in affluent contexts are conducive to participation because of the supply of infrastructures, such as churches, neighbourhood centres, neighbourhood watches and other associations (Clifford, 2018), which tend to be more active and stimulating.

Yet, other recent studies indicate that this could be changing. Custer et al. (2019) conversely found that in Rotterdam (The Netherlands) between 2008 and 2013, civic participation declined in more affluent neighbourhoods while it increased slightly in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The authors explain their findings mainly through two mechanisms. First, the greater reliance on private resources for civic participation in more affluent neighbourhoods as compared to more deprived areas which have seen greater investments by the municipality of Rotterdam to support civic engagement in a period of crisis. Second, the fact that, in a macro-economic context of recession, the perception of scarcity and how it affects individuals' daily life is higher in more deprived neighbourhoods than in the more affluent ones. In sum, Custer et al. (2019) find that more severe experiences of scarcity can boost civic engagement if there is public investment in social infrastructure incentivizes civic participation.

The purpose of the present study is to reappraise what has been found in previous studies through a more comprehensive quantitative analysis and to investigate the mechanisms linking experiences of collective material deprivation and various forms of associational membership. Without, indeed, disputing the long tradition of previous community studies, a more general quantitative investigation of how neighbourhood deprivation affects civic participation is compelling for two reasons. First, a quantitative study leveraging a large sample allows for a more generalizable inference than qualitative studies. Secondly, a quantitative study empirically tests the relative importance of conflicting mechanisms. On the one hand, a rational interpretation would expect individuals living in more deprived areas to be more involved in voluntary associations as a means to improve collective conditions. On the other hand, community deprivation may change the social 'fabric' by altering social norms and fraying those social relationships in the community which are necessary for the functioning of voluntary organizations.

Taking a Durkheimian view, we see individuals' associational membership as not only depending on individual willingness but also on the community which structures a person's decision to participate. Drawing on existing research from multiple disciplines (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Ostrom, 2000), we postulate that contextual conditions of economic scarcity alter the norms and incentives of civic participation. For this reason, we investigate the differential relevance of community deprivation across different types of voluntary organizations, comparing and contrasting its

association with work, political, and civic organizational membership. To better understand these patterns, we test different competing mechanisms through which neighbourhood deprivation can be related to individual associational membership. To be clear, in this article, we are interested in the deprivation that exists in a person's current neighbourhood, rather than a cumulative deprivation experienced during the life-course.

This study presents first a conceptual model of how community deprivation operates as an environment that provides the norms and incentives for civic participation. We investigate this by disentangling associations into three separate domains: civic, political, and work and the differential impact of community deprivation across these. Then, through a quantitative inquiry, we examine community deprivation in a longitudinal perspective, rather than cross-sectionally as it is typically done (Andrews, 2008; Coffé & Geys, 2006; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). The longitudinal design allows us to disentangle community deprivation from individual socio-economic circumstances and minimize neighbourhood selection bias. We examine how economic strain at the meso-level (i.e., the neighbourhood) forms a structural context for civic participation and, by doing so, we aim to advance the understanding of how meso-level processes operate as structural forces for individuals living with economic hardship.

The United Kingdom is a suitable setting for our study since it has a long-standing tradition of associational membership (Curtis et al., 1992; Morris, 1990) and civic organizations (Almond & Verba, 1963). While the erosion of the latter has been documented in the United States in the final part of the 20th century (Putnam, 2000), this trend has not been observed in Britain where it remains quite high (Hall, 1999). There are various advantages to a sub-national study since both deprivation and civic involvement can vary greatly from one community to another. Within Britain, associational membership is unequally distributed across social groups and concentrated in the upper portion of the class hierarchy (Warde et al., 2003). While participation has been relatively stable in the middle class, working-class civic involvement has dwindled (Li et al., 2003). Some have suggested that membership has declined due to rising diversity in British neighbourhoods (Laurence, 2011) but recent evidence does not support this argument and suggests that it is caused by collective scarcity instead (Demireva & Heath, 2014).

2 | THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

Participation in voluntary associations is socially structured and it is more likely to occur in societies with more resources. Existing research has mostly investigated the role of the national context in explaining differences in associational membership (Curtis et al., 2001; Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001). However, some research shows that this behaviour varies sub-nationally (Bell & Force, 1956; Eckstein, 2001; Hays, 2015). Thus, living in a materially deprived area may be a structural circumstance that could both incentivize or inhibit voluntary associationism. To better understand this process, we draw on the sociological tradition of studying associational membership to identify three different motivations for participation. We begin by explaining each motivation and then outline our expectations regarding how community deprivation can affect participation by influencing each of these. Figure 1 schematically represents the hypothesized mechanisms.

2.1 | Associational membership as social cohering

Individuals are motivated to join voluntary associations because they desire to socially cohere with others. Social cohesion is a prismatic concept with different components that "include common values and a civic culture, social order and social control, social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities, social networks and social capital, and territorial belonging and identity" (Kearns & Forrest, 2000, p. 996) whereby an individual seeks to "fit in to create a cohesive society" (Becares et al., 2011, p. 2272).

Many studies within the social capital literature assume a unidirectional causal effect from associational membership to social cohesion (Paxton, 2007; Whiteley et al., 1999). These studies typically advocate for the cultivation of

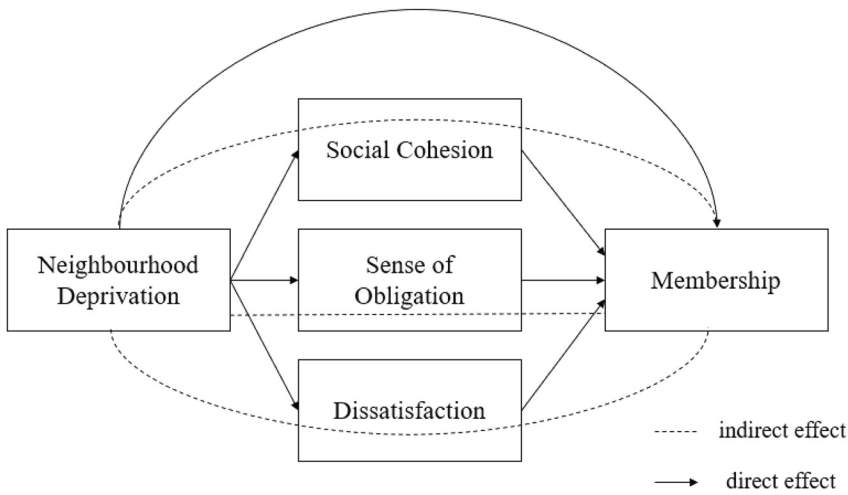


FIGURE 1 Hypothesized mechanisms.

civic engagement to foster social cohesion and increase social capital. However, this unidirectional perspective may be fallacious because it could also function in reverse (Sønderskov, 2011) whereby social cohesion affects associational membership. If it is the latter, then stronger social cohesion among residents would increase their participation in the community (Rothstein, 2005).

According to Hall (1999), associational membership presents a forum for community members to have face-to-face interactions and engages members in a collective purpose (Hall, 1999). This approach is similar to Putnam (2000) which expects individuals to engage in local associations when they feel they are surrounded by people they like. Empirical research using different approaches, from political science (Scholz & Lubell, 1998; Gächter et al., 2004; Holm & Danielson, 2005; Sønderskov, 2011) to experimental designs (Cook & Cooper, 2003; Tooby et al., 2006), shows that people who report higher trust in their neighbours tend to collaborate because of a cooperative ethos, suggesting that collaboration is mainly driven by positive expectations about other people's behaviours (Scholz & Lubell, 1998; Gächter et al., 2004; Holm & Danielson, 2005; Sønderskov, 2011).

According to Tolsma et al. (2009), community deprivation tends to lower social cohesion because resources necessary for fostering social connection such as trust, safety, and residential stability are lacking (Völker et al., 2007). Often, materially deprived areas also suffer from social isolation (Rankin & Quane, 2000) and share experiences of unemployment which further lower sociability in affected societies (Gallie et al., 2003). Voluntary associations provide meeting opportunities for people to engage but this may not be welcomed in deprived communities which lack the social or material conditions for participation to take place safely or consistently. A lack of cohesion deprives localities of developing forms of interdependency which fosters community involvement such as shared knowledge, common activities, and frequent contact (Völker et al., 2007). In sum, individuals in deprived communities may be less socially connected and we expect this to be negatively related to voluntary membership.

2.2 | Associational membership as obligation

Some people participate in various associations because they feel they ought to. The obligation is a norm which perpetuates voluntary participation in civic society (Almond & Verba, 1963). This sense of obligation is derived from a sense of duty towards the community. Civic engagement is often driven by individuals' personal value systems (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1997). Norms of obligation emerge as the result of a socialization process through which individuals learn the appropriate civic activities and ways of engagement based on the norms and practices of

a given community. Social norms determine what are the appropriate or inappropriate behaviours in a social group and, as such, they are extremely influential on individual behaviours. According to this logic, individuals are motivated to participate in associations because this is defined as 'normal' or 'good' according to collective norms. For instance, civic involvement can confer pride as a symbol of decency and reliability in a community (Jakob, 1993; Wuthnow & Wuthnow, 1998) while not engaging might generate a sense of guilt or personal deficiency.

Put simply, the obligation motivation and the social cohering motivations differ because the first is a norm-guided action while the second is a rational-instrumental action. A sense of obligation is a norm-guided action based on a perception of moral responsibility. As Max Weber noted, actions that are based on convention or conformity tend to be "unreflective, set disposition to engage in actions that have been long practiced" (Weber as quoted in Camic, 1986, p. 1057). Individuals can conform to these to avoid informal social sanctions such as judgement. Over time, conformity to norms can be habit forming, known as 'habituated normativity' whereby most people engage in and follow social norms because they are habitually used to doing so. On the other hand, the motivation for social cohering refers to an instrumental action based on a person's subjective interpretation of the utility of such participation rather than social approval. To illustrate this point we consider a parallel with electoral participation. Citizens can vote out of civic duty to be a "good citizen" or fears of informal social sanction (e.g., judgement) or they can vote because of the rational utility they derive from having their preferred candidate win an election.

The sense of duty and obligation to participate in associations in England can be observed when we consider the political discourse during the time of our study. Emphasizing norms of civic participation was, in fact, part of New Labour's policy agenda. In 2008 the UK government released a White Paper calling upon UK citizens' 'duty to involve' in England and Wales, explicitly aiming to embed a culture of community engagement and participation in aim to strengthen democratic legitimacy (DCLG, 2008). Appealing to British norms of volunteerism and civic participation was then carried on during David Cameron's government under his 'Big Society' policy scheme. The idea behind the Big Society was that "voluntary activity should, can, and will emerge as a perfect substitute for the welfare state reinvigorated debate on the relationship between government and society, or, more specifically, between public spending and volunteering" (Bartels et al., 2013, p. 340).

There is reason to expect that deprived communities have different social norms, including those that pertain to associational membership. It has been observed that the spatial clustering of material deprivation tends to produce deviant social norms in distressed areas (Wilson, 1987). Thus "concentrated deviance" occurs through the process of social learning from daily life in the community. Deviant behaviour often refers to criminality or delinquency. However, it can also be thought of more broadly as any behaviour that does not conform to behaviour typical for the broader society. For instance, if engaging in voluntary associations is the norm then not engaging would be a behaviour that deviates from such a norm. Scholars of urban poverty have described communities as an ecology which "shape what can be termed cognitive landscapes or ecologically structured norms (e.g., normative ecologies) regarding appropriate standards and expectations of conduct" (Sampson & Wilson, 1995, p. 50). Deviance is normalized in the community and thus exerts invisible pressure on individuals who live there as it becomes contagious among residents (Small, 2002). Living in deprived neighbourhoods can shape the attitudes and aspirations of individuals through different means, such as the absence of role models (Newman & Newman, 1999), the stereotyping by public officials (Jencks & Mayer, 1990) and the development of oppositional culture towards mainstream society (Massey & Denton, 1993). The result is that adaptive strategies to collective impoverishment often produce norms which are in contrast with wider societal norms (Wilson, 1987, 2011).

2.3 | Associational membership as activated dissatisfaction

There is also an alternative logic according to which community deprivation might have the opposite relationship with associational membership. Material deprivation can also incentivize participation in voluntary associations as a response to socio-economic dissatisfaction. In this view, membership is a purposeful response to one's discontent

with ongoing societal problems. Often, local areas operate as heuristic devices (a cue or proxy) for individuals to draw conclusions about how things are going in the national society (Weitz-Shapiro, 2008). According to this mechanism, membership is motivated by striving for the common good (Jacob, 1993) and can be a kind of defensive strategy (Ellison, 1997) whereby these organizations provide members with problem-solving strategies. According to this logic, individuals are activated rather than paralysed by the conditions of scarcity that surround them. Community involvement can be a governing channel for this activism. It offers new forms of neighbourhood participation and local engagement of residents that can 'reactivate motivation and personal responsibility (Rose, 2000, p. 329). This form of collective action often occurs when formal institutions fail to deliver to citizens (Somma, 2017). For instance, a qualitative study of local areas in Spain found that organizations are sources of collective empowerment in response to economic crises (Morales-Villena et al., 2021).

The activated discontent motivation would likely not occur uniformly across all forms of voluntary membership. Deprivation creates a "culture of necessity" as described by Bourdieu (1984, p. 384). In this sense, material deprivation puts pressure on both time and money, which we expect makes individuals less likely to pursue leisure or hobby activities through associational membership. Yet, at the same time, community deprivation may induce the desire for enacting change through engaging in political organizations. From a rational point of view, individuals would be incentivized to participate if their involvement might improve their everyday safety or the allocation of resources to the deprived area. For instance, neighbourhood crime is one of the issues which has been shown to galvanize local community associations (Bursik, 1999).

3 | DATA AND METHODS

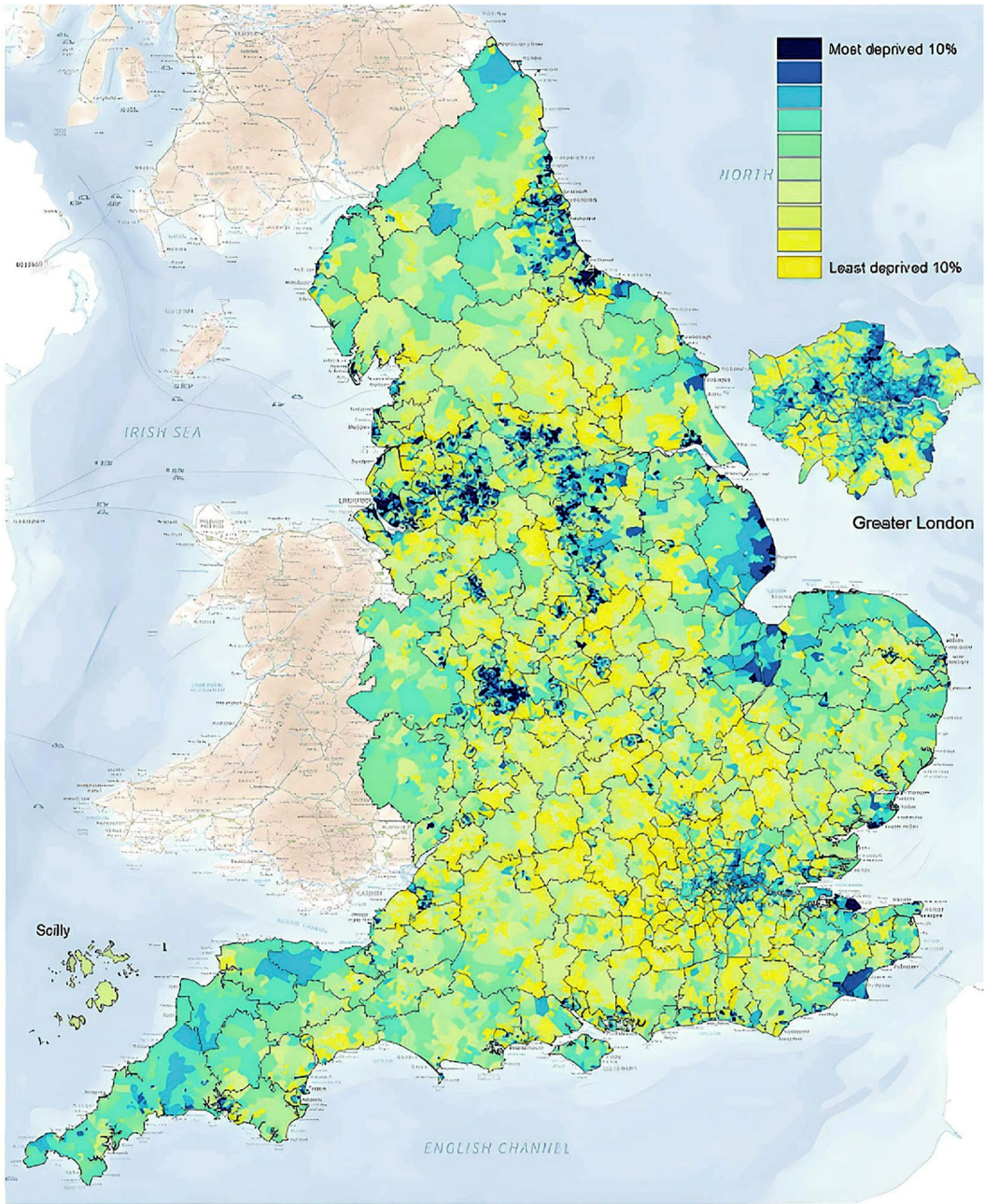
We use data about England from Understanding Society - The UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), a yearly panel study of more than 40,000 households in the UK which began in 2009. We pool this with the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) produced by the Office of National Statistics (ONS).¹ Our merged data are suitable because they allow us to: track individual exposure to changes in community deprivation across 10 years (2010–2019); define community at a granular level; accurately measure deprivation as well as various forms of civic involvement.

Since we are interested in investigating individuals' experiences of deprivation in an immediate social environment, we define the neighbourhood at the Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOA) level (Figure 2). LSOAs are similar in size with stable boundaries (unlike electoral wards) and consistent with units used by the IMD. LSOAs typically contain between 1000 and 3000 people with an average population of 1400 people (Manley, 2021).

Concerning neighbourhood deprivation, the IMD considers varied domains such as income deprivation, employment structure, criminality, quality of the housing stock and of public services. This measure allows us to better capture the multi-dimensional nature of neighbourhood deprivation. To produce a continuous measure between each observation period and to match these to the years of observation in the UKHLS, we interpolate between the years that the English IMD editions released in 2010, 2015 and 2019. As a final step, we standardize the values (mean 0, standard deviation 1, ranging from -1.38–4.36). The higher the score the more deprived the area.

For our dependent variables, the UKHLS includes a battery of questions regarding different types of voluntary associations respondents engage in. All outcomes are surveyed at three points in time – 2011, 2014 and 2017. In our main analysis, we separate these into three different outcomes: political, work, and civic membership. In this paper, we aim to capture different forms of participation in the public sphere and therefore distinguish between so-called top-down and bottom-up forms of participation (Moreno-Jimenez et al., 2013; Vidal, 1991). The former tends to be characterised by a more formal and institutionalised structure and is organized at the national level. Political parties and trade unions are examples of these. The latter, instead, rely more on spontaneity, frequently related to more leisure activities tending to be locally organized, more flexible and less structured.

There may be also different motivations for participating in these three forms of associations. Following Barrett and Brunton-Smith (2014) we assume that people participate in political parties because of their willingness to



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FIGURE 2 Distribution of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019 by Layer Super Output Areas (LSOA) in England. Source: Noble et al., 2019. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

influence either regional, national or supranational governance (Verba et al., 1995). Similarly, the reason to be active members of trade unions seems to be motivated by the desire to have an impact on more macro-trends, from the regional to the national level (Schnabel & Wagner, 2003). The main difference from participation in political parties is that trade union membership is mostly driven by labour market participation, which is the main reason why we opted for keeping the two measures separate. By contrast, people engage with civic organisations when they aim to help others, share common experiences, achieve a public good or solve a community problem (Zukin et al., 2006).

TABLE 1 Mean rate of active participation in civic organisations.

Type of civic organisation	%
Parents	5.1
Tenants	2.8
Voluntary	5.8
Pensioners	1.7
Scouts	1.9
Community	3.6
Social	4.9
Sports	16.5
Women's	1.1
Men's	1.0

Source: Authors' calculation on UKHLS.

Abbreviation: UKHLS, The UK Household Longitudinal Study.

We choose, therefore, to separate associations into three domains (political, work, and civic) since previous empirical evidence has shown that poor economic conditions affect political and non-political civic participation differently (Lim & Sander, 2013). There is evidence of local economic conditions being pertinent to political participation at the national level (Blanchard & Matthews, 2006) and affecting voting patterns in national elections (Healy & Lenz, 2017). Rosenstone (1982) argues that experiences of economic scarcity at the local level ruin social relationships and that this social breakdown depresses voter turnout. Evidence for the relationship between local economic conditions and union membership is more mixed. For example, evidence from the United States shows that states with higher poverty rates have lower rates of union density (Van Heuvelen and Brady, 2022) while in the UK areas with high unemployment are associated with higher union participation (Blanchflower et al., 1990).

Political membership is a dummy variable indicating whether a person is an active member of a political party or not. *Work membership* is also a dummy variable that indicates whether a person is an active member or not of trade unions and/or a professional organisation. Finally, *civic membership* is an ordinal count variable summing how many organisations a person is an active member of. Respondents are asked to choose from: parent associations, tenant groups, voluntary service groups, pensioner organisations, scouts, community groups, social groups, sports clubs, and women's or men's groups. The total value ranges from 0 to 8.¹ To make the latter measurement coherent with the other two measures and for a better understanding of the results we have dichotomised this variable creating a dummy equal to one if the individual is an active member of at least one.²

Table 1 displays the mean participation rates of each of the 10 forms of associations showing similar values for all organisations with the only exception of sports organisations. Since sports organisations are considered important forms of engagement in British society (Dacombe, 2021), although this form of participation may differ from the others included, we believe it is important to include it (we tested all models iteratively removing one organisation each time and the results remain identical). The Cronbach alpha measuring how closely related our set items are as a group is 0.28, below the threshold of 0.7 which would recommend combining the three items into a single scale, suggesting that we are indeed considering different forms of associations. For these reasons, to avoid the participation rate in one organisation might dominate the others, we did not create a unique factor, merging the different components, but we have opted for measuring participation as being actively engaged in at least one of these associations.

Community organizations are very heterogenous and they have been grouped together in various different ways in the past literature. For instance, Swaroop and Morenoff (2006) group them as either instrumental or expressive organisations. In our approach, we create a comprehensive measure of individual participation in both instrumental and expressive civic organizations. After ruling out the possibility of certain types of civic associations producing

extreme values affecting our results, we choose to proceed with one indicator for civic associations which we distinguish from participation in work and political organizations.

Some distinguish between token membership and active membership (see Oliver, 1984). We are interested in contributing individuals and therefore aim to measure the latter. For all three variables we refer to active membership. The survey questionnaire includes questions about both being a registered member and an active member. This distinction gives us confidence that by using active membership we can identify individuals who have a certain degree of engagement in the associations rather than simply card-carrying members.³

We also introduce measures for the three mechanisms identified above. First, we measure the perceived sense of obligation to participate in public life using the survey question "Do you personally agree or disagree with the sentence: I would be seriously neglecting my duty as a citizen if I didn't vote". We dichotomize the response into a dummy variable which is set to one if the answer is "I strongly agree" or "I agree" and set to zero if the answers are "Neither agree nor disagree", "Disagree" or "strongly disagree."⁴ Naturally, a limitation of this survey item is that it refers to the civic obligation of voting and does not specifically ask about the civic obligation of associational membership. Unfortunately, questions about feeling obligated to participate in associations do not appear in the questionnaire. We assume that social norms about general civic engagement underlie both civic participation and voting participation (van Londen et al., 2007; Verba et al., 1978) and we are confident that the survey question we use reveals adherence to such norms. Voting participation is also motivated by social norms (Gerber & Rogers, 2009) and there is a strong correlation between voting participation and involvement in other socially cooperative activities (Knack, 1992; Teorell, 2003).

The second hypothesized mechanism is through social cohering in the neighbourhood. We derive our measure of neighbourhood social cohesion from a reduced version of the Buckner index of social cohesion (Buckner, 1988) which is a subjective measure aiming to capture attraction to the neighbourhood, neighbourliness and psychological sense of community. The Buckner index is a frequently used way of capturing social cohesion (mean 0.25, standard deviation 0.95, ranging from 3.43 to 1.97). The greater the score, the greater the perceived social cohesion.⁵

The third and final mechanism that we hypothesize is a means through which individuals express their dissatisfaction. The survey does not include a measure of dissatisfaction with how things are in the local community. While this remains a limitation, we address this by using a survey item about satisfaction with democracy in the UK as a proxy. Evidence shows that citizens' perceptions of local performance and democratic performance at the national level are strongly related (Weitz-Shapiro, 2008). As argued by Weitz-Shapiro (2008) this occurs because daily interactions with the state occur at the local level through public services and citizens use this as a heuristic device to derive their satisfaction with the democratic function of national institutions. In our study, democratic satisfaction is a dummy variable derived from the question "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, a little dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in this country?" which we have re-coded to 1 for the first two options and to 0 otherwise.

The Cronbach's alpha for the three forms of associational participation is 0.3, again, well below the threshold of 0.7 which would suggest combining the three items into a single scale. Additionally, the pairwise correlations between the three different associational domains of participation range from 0.04 to 0.2, showing little correlation among them. Table 2 shows that the pattern of participation across neighbourhoods by deprivation deciles holds across all three domains: active membership rates are consistently lower in more deprived neighbourhoods.

The empirical analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we want to investigate how correlated neighbourhood deprivation is with the three mediators which are social cohering, obligation and satisfaction. It is important to first determine whether there is any relationship between our mediators and our main independent variable and the direction of this relationship. Second, we estimate fixed-effects (i.e., within-subjects, removing time-invariant characteristics) models with the three membership variables as dependent variables and neighbourhood deprivation as the main independent variable. None of these include the three mediators.

In the next step, we then add the mediators. Following the literature (Becares et al., 2011) in all models we control for time-varying (and unvarying in the first cross-sectional model) individual, household and neighbourhood

TABLE 2 Mean rate of active membership by neighbourhood deprivation deciles, empirical sample.

Deprivation deciles	Active membership %		
	Civic	Political	Work
1-Least deprived	49.1	2.2	8.3
2	44.3	1.9	8.1
3	44.2	2.2	8.4
4	41.8	2.0	7.6
5	40.6	2.4	7.6
6	37.9	2.3	6.5
7	36.7	2.7	6.3
8	31.2	2.8	6.3
9	28.3	1.7	4.8
10-Most deprived	24.5	1.6	4.2
Mean	37.8	2.2	6.8

Source: Authors' calculation on UKHLS and IMD.

Abbreviations: IMD, Index of Multiple Deprivation; UKHLS, The UK Household Longitudinal Study.

characteristics (age; educational level (max. secondary vocational, above secondary non-vocational); ethnicity (white British, non-white British); employment status (employed, non-employed); low social class (routine and semi-routine); household income terciles, housing tenure (owned, rented, social housing, other); partnership status (living with a partner yes/no); the number of children living in the household (0, 1, 2, 3+); household size (1, 2, 3, 4, 5+); longevity residing in the community (years), percentage of white people living in the neighbourhood (interpolation of Census data in 2001 and 2011).⁶

In a third step, we use generalised structural equation modelling (GSEM) to better study the patterns linking the independent variable (neighbourhood deprivation) with the dependent variable(s) through the three mediators. Generalised structural equation modelling is a development of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) which can model mediation and is suitable for categorical and ordinal data. Generalised structural equation modelling allows us to simultaneously test the influence of competing forces and disentangle the various mechanisms. We can thus investigate the associations between multiple outcomes and mediators at the same time rather than estimating these with separate regressions. Finally, another important feature of GSEM is it allows for the disaggregation of the independent and mediator variables into direct effects. In other words we can investigate the direct association between the independent variable and both the mediators and with the outcomes separately. We are also able to study indirect effects, which are the associations between the outcomes and the independent variable mediated by the mediators. A GSEM application can provide useful insights into the pathways of the associations between the independent variables and the outcomes through the mediators. As GSEM does not allow for fixed effect modelling, we are circumspect using the analysis for causal inference as we cannot rule out omitted variable bias. Nonetheless, we are interested in providing robust evidence and analysis of statistical associations which may imply a causal narrative that can be further tested in future studies (Marini & Singer, 1988).

Understanding Society has proven to be both very representative of the British population (Lynn & Borkowska, 2018) and very stable in terms of attrition. However, as any household panel study, it evolves over time and experiences some level of attrition.⁷ Therefore, we apply the UKHLS longitudinal weight to correct for sample selection and attrition in our analysis.

Finally, instead of clustering at the individual level (to consider solely within-individual correlation), we cluster at the LSOA level. Since we identify the neighbourhood at the LSOA level, we want to avoid within-cluster correlation biases at the treatment level (Cameron & Miller, 2014).

4 | RESULTS

Table 3 shows the results of the models testing for the association between neighbourhood deprivation and the three mediators: social cohering, sense of obligation, and democratic satisfaction. Neighbourhood deprivation is an objective measure provided by the ONS, the three mediators are subjective self-reported measures. We can see that living in a one standard deviation more deprived neighbourhood reduces social cohering (mean 0.254, standard deviation 0.946, ranging from -3.43 – 1.97) by almost one unit, norms of civic obligation, and democratic satisfaction by 0.036 and 0.043% points respectively. Overall, this suggests that people living in more deprived areas tend to feel less involved in their community, less engaged with social life, and less satisfied with politics.

In Table 4 we model how neighbourhood deprivation is related to the propensity to participate in voluntary associations in a longitudinal framework. We first show the results without including the three mediators (columns 1–3) and then we include the mediators (columns 4–6). There is no evidence of a statistical relationship between deprivation and either of the three forms of associationism. We conversely see that people who feel more socially connected to their community, have a significantly larger probability of being an active member of at least one civic association. Similarly, a person with a one-unit higher value of social cohesion has a 1.209 higher probability of being an active member of a civic association and a 1.198 higher probability of being an active member of a political party. Also, those who report a stronger sense of obligation towards civic engagement are 2.579 times more likely to be members of political parties. On the other hand, democratic satisfaction does not seem to affect the likelihood to participate in any form of association.

Finally, in Table 5 and Figure 3, we use GSEM to investigate the paths of neighbourhood deprivation affecting associationism directly and through the mediators. First, we can observe a strong significant negative association between deprivation and cohesion, sense of obligation and satisfaction with the democratic functioning of the country. Second, we can see that both cohesion and the sense of obligation have a strong, significant positive association with all forms of membership. Conversely, the more people are satisfied with the democratic functioning of the country, the lower the probability that they get involved in political and work-related associations. Meanwhile, there is no evidence of a negative association with civic engagement. Finally, deprivation has only a slightly significant positive relationship with work-related associationism but no other statistically significant relationship with the other two domains.

To test for possible alternative mechanisms that we might have overlooked in the analysis, we have performed several robustness checks. Considering the GSEM as our main model of interest, we have tested four alternative

TABLE 3 Association between neighbourhood deprivation and social cohering, sense of obligation, and satisfaction about democratic functioning, standardised OLS and logit marginal effects, wave 3 (2011–2012).

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Social cohering	Sense of obligation	Satisfaction
Neighbourhood deprivation	-0.096^{***} (0.010)	-0.036^{***} (0.004)	-0.043^{***} (0.004)
Constant	-0.821^{***} (0.053)	0.687^{***} (0.075)	0.489^{***} (0.283)
Number of observations	55,525	52,808	52,091
R2	0.118	0.123	0.135

Note: controls include: age, gender, ethnicity, education, employment status, social class, household income, tenure, partnership status, number of children living in the household, household size, and percentage of white people residing in the neighbourhood. Clustered standard errors in parentheses. Different sample sizes depend on the response rate for the different survey items.

Abbreviation: OLS, ordinary least squares.

$^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

TABLE 4 Form of associationism, longitudinal logistic model, odds ratios.

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Civic membership	Political membership	Work membership	Civic membership	Political membership	Work membership
Neighbourhood deprivation	0.990 (0.034)	1.034 (0.137)	1.007 (0.064)	1.022 (0.047)	1.076 (0.174)	1.119 (0.092)
Neighbourhood cohesion	NO	NO	NO	1.209*** (0.025)	1.198* (0.092)	0.963 (0.036)
Sense of obligation	NO	NO	NO	1.067 (0.067)	2.579*** (1.741)	0.987 (0.109)
Democratic satisfaction	NO	NO	NO	0.968 (0.031)	0.881 (0.114)	1.055 (0.061)
Number of observations	39,975	2658	12,052	26,106	1901	8395
Number of individual observations	13,119	891	3911	9752	713	3098

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 5 Generalised structural equation modelling (GSEM), deprivation and mediators.

Social cohering, linear model			
	Direct	Indirect	Total
Neighbourhood deprivation	-0.104*** (.0108)	. (.)	-0.104*** (0.0108)
Sense of obligation, logistic model, marginal effects			
	Direct	Indirect	Total
Neighbourhood deprivation	-0.150*** (.0123)	. (.)	-0.150*** (0.0123)
Satisfaction, logistic model, marginal effects			
	Direct	Indirect	Total
Neighbourhood deprivation	-0.183*** (.0170)	0 (.)	-0.183*** (0.0170)
Political active membership, logistic model, odds ratios			
	Direct	Indirect	Total
Social cohering	1.32*** (0.069)	. (.)	1.32*** (0.069)
Sense of obligation	4.46*** (0.158)	. (.)	4.46*** (0.158)
Satisfaction	0.567*** (0.158)	. (.)	0.567*** (0.158)

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

Political active membership, logistic model, odds ratios			
	Direct	Indirect	Total
Neighbourhood deprivation	1.14 (0.106)	1.17 (0.045)	1.35 (0.146)
Civic active membership, logistic model, odds ratios			
	Direct	Indirect	Total
Social cohering	1.28*** (0.210)	.	1.28*** (0.210)
Sense of obligation	1.16*** (0.158)	.	1.16*** (0.158)
Satisfaction	1.01 (0.158)	.	1.01 (0.158)
Neighbourhood deprivation	1.01 (0.102)	1.01 (0.007)	1.01 (0.101)
Work active membership, logistic model, odds ratios			
	Direct	Indirect	Total
Social cohering	1.15*** (0.047)	.	1.15*** (0.047)
Sense of obligation	1.50*** (0.158)	.	1.50*** (0.158)
Satisfaction	0.888* (0.158)	.	0.888* (0.158)
Neighbourhood deprivation	1.06+ (0.047)	1.03 (0.008)	1.09+ (0.980)
Number of observations	71,898		

Note: Controls include: age, gender, education, employment status, social class, household income, tenure, partnership status, number of children living in the household, household size, and percentage of white people residing in the neighbourhood. Clustered standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.1$.

specifications (see Supplementary Material). First, Figure A1 reports the results when we restrict the analysis to individuals living in the same local area for at least 10 years to exclude a possible confounding effect of previous neighbourhoods. To address a possible criticism that our results are driven by selection bias in neighbourhood choice, Figure A2 restricts the analysis to social housing tenants who have a limited choice about the neighbourhood, given the quasi-randomisation of the social housing allocation in England. Thirdly, we have replicated our analysis considering the alternative measure of membership, that is, being a member, rather than an active member in Figure A3. Lastly, Figure A4 reports the results when we remove individuals living in the two most deprived neighbourhoods from the analysis, to test whether our results are driven by outliers. Overall, the results are very stable and we do not detect any substantive differences. It should be noted that, when considering passive membership, the coefficients tend to be larger and more significant. This difference indicates that our main results are more conservative and are instead a lower-bound.

A limitation of our study is that we do not take into consideration the structure of opportunities to participate in associations. In other words, we cannot account for the number of associations that exist in each neighbourhood

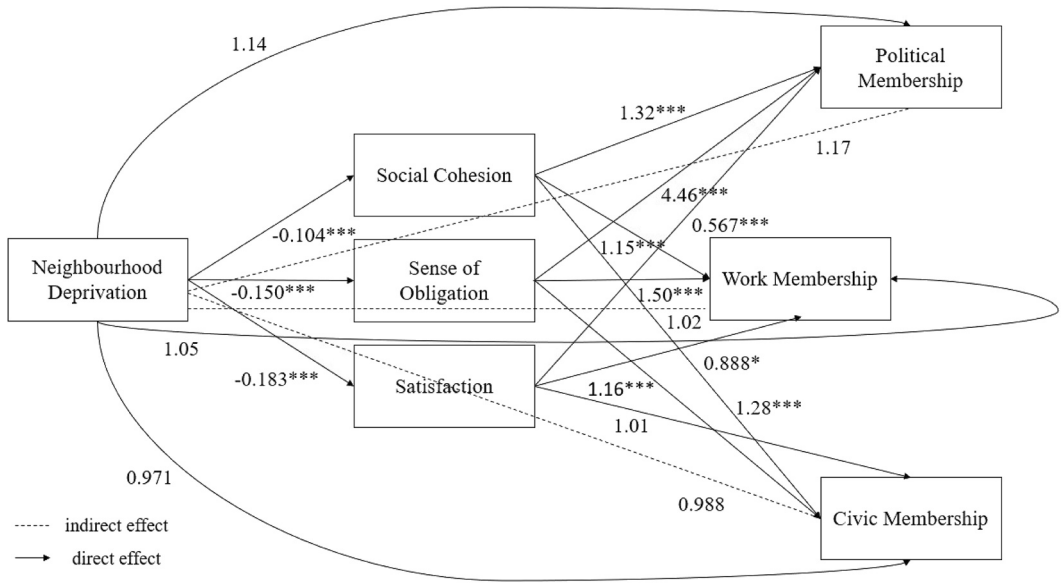


FIGURE 3 Estimated mechanisms. Source: Authors' own elaboration from The UK Household Longitudinal Study.

and thus are unable to determine if individuals living in deprived areas do not participate in voluntary associations because they choose not to or simply because they are not available. This issue might be particularly pertinent in more rural or remote areas in England which are also less densely populated and do not have such social organizations. Moreover, the findings pertain to groupings of three different domains (civic, political and work) and inferences must be kept to this level of groupings, from our analysis we are unable to distinguish between the different types of associations which exist within these domains (for instance a local voluntary association vs. a local sports group) and recognize that it is possible that effects within these domains could be heterogeneous.

It is also worth noting that our study suffers from a limitation which is common to neighbourhood studies. The LSOAs are administratively created units, which can be socially arbitrary. This can create a gap between the geographic measurement of neighbourhoods and what respondents consider to be their neighbourhood, which is likely the influential unit. One alternative is to use bespoke neighbourhoods (Knies et al., 2021). In this study, we are unable to use these as it would not have been possible to pool these with reliable and comparable measures of deprivation.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study quantifies and tests the mechanisms connecting the experiences of material deprivation where individuals live and their propensity to engage in different forms of associations. Our results indicate that the social isolation that commonly occurs in deprived neighbourhoods is a strong mechanism for reducing participation. Social cohering plays a substantively large positive role on civic and political membership, suggesting that the more people feel attached to their community, the more likely they are to participate in local associations as well as national ones such as political parties and trade unions. The lack of social cohesion occurs when residents feel less closely attached to the neighbourhood and to each other and we speculate that this alters the prism through which residents perceive the benefits of participation. As participation requires an investment of time and energy, individuals may be less likely to invest these finite resources if they feel less connected to those around them.

We also confirm a normative mechanism, whereby deprivation has a cultural influence on civic participation. Our study finds that neighbourhood deprivation depresses norms of civic obligation which, in turn, lowers the propensity for engagement. On the flip side, adhering to norms regarding the obligation to participate civically has an important positive association with all forms of membership, with a strikingly large relevance for political membership. Weaker norms about civic participation being the “right” thing to do alter the incentive structure for participating. As there are fewer perceived social benefits from this behaviour, people are less likely to see value in such activities.

Interestingly, our findings show that experiencing deprivation can also be positively associated with some forms of membership. We only find a positive direct association with neighbourhood deprivation for participation in political associations and not for the other types. Nevertheless, this is important because it demonstrates that neighbourhood deprivation simultaneously exerts competing forces on the participation of its residents. One possible explanation for this heterogeneous pattern is that when individuals live in an environment of collective deprivation, they spend more energy in forms of associationism which are dedicated to societal change and less in forms which are related to hobbies, leisure, or socializing. Moreover, the result speaks to the existing debate about economic scarcity and electoral mobilization (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000) and fits with the notion that economic scarcity fuels electoral participation by galvanizing voters who wish to punish incumbents for poor economic conditions (Burden & Wichowsky, 2014; Aguilar & Pacek, 2000; Lipset, 1960). We speculate that membership in political associations in more deprived areas may similarly mobilize political expression.

Our study has important implications for the study of collective economic hardship and social behaviour. Our findings confirm that when it comes to the benefits of neighbourhood social life, people already experiencing material lack are doubly disadvantaged. This is consistent with the well-documented double disadvantage (Shaw & McKay, 1942) whereby disadvantaged residents are negatively affected both by their experience of individual economic hardship and also by the likelihood of living in close proximity to other disadvantaged people. These concentrated areas of deprivation produce structural disadvantages, which then further disadvantage residents. In the case of associational membership, individuals with low income and education are less likely to participate in voluntary associations in the first place, and contextual neighbourhood deprivation exerts further external negative pressure on participation.

Our findings do not refute the notion that associational membership fosters social cohesion and other economic benefits as argued by (Putnam, 2000). Rather, our findings imply that this relationship is bi-directional: individuals living in less cohesive neighbourhoods are less civically involved and this produces an additive pattern of disadvantage since civic involvement builds social cohesion. Paradoxically, communities that have scarce resources are those that stand to benefit more from social organizations but these are the places where these social activities are less frequent. The social capital produced by voluntary associations has the potential to reduce inequality but much is still to be learned about the complex and mutually enforcing mechanisms of deprivation which keep the disadvantaged socially disconnected from civic engagement.

We encourage future sociological research to carry on its long but withering tradition of studying voluntary associations and hope that our findings offer some fruitful avenues. Firstly, there are certain features of neighbourhood deprivation which might encourage civic involvement but exactly what these features are must be better understood. For instance, emotional aspects regarding neighbourhood attachment to the place (not just to other neighbourhood residents), such as identity could galvanize participation. It would also be interesting to understand how residents in deprived areas perceive the personal dividends of participation and qualitative research would be particularly useful to help untangle the sense-making and reasoning that underpins their choices. This would also provide an opportunity to explore divergent relationships by types of associations which have emerged in our study. Finally, it would be complimentary to study how much exposure to deprivation during childhood has long-lasting effects on civic and political engagement in adulthood.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We confirm that this work is original and has not been published, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the UK DATA SERVICE. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available at <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/> with the permission of UK DATA SERVICE.

ORCID

Franco Bonomi Bezzo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0899-552X>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ We restrict our analysis to England because the IMD is not homogeneously calculated across the United Kingdom.
- ² We have pursued the analysis also with the original ordinal variables and the results do not change.
- ³ Figure A3 in the Supplementary Material, presents the results when using the alternative measures of membership.
- ⁴ We tested the model when coding the neutral category as one instead and the results do not change.
- ⁵ "Neighbourhood Cohesion. Adapted from Buckner's Neighbourhood Cohesion Instrument. See Buckner, J. C. (1988). "The development of an instrument to measure neighbourhood cohesion." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 16(6): 771–791. Computed as the mean reverse-coded response (rounded to 1-decimal point) to the original variables. Higher values represent greater cohesion, ranging from 1 "lowest cohesion" to 5 "highest cohesion". Note that Understanding Society includes only one one of three items measuring attraction to the neighbourhood (SCOPNGBHF), three out of six items measuring neighbouring (SCOPNGBHD SCOPNGBHC SCOPNGBHH) and four out of nine items measuring psychological sense of community (SCOPNGBHG SCOPNGBHA SCOPNGBHB SCOPNGBHE). To assure a good representation of all three domains in the summary score, the derived variable is set to -9 "missing" if there was item non-response for more than half the input variables in any of the three domains. Cronbach's Alpha is reported in the variable label." https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage/dataset-documentation/variable/nbrsnci_dv
- ⁶ Table A1 in the appendix show full descriptive statistics for the analysis.
- ⁷ <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/about/who-are-our-participants#:~:text=Understanding%20Society%20is%20designed%20to,decade%20from%20the%201940s%20onwards.b>

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