

# The Neighborhood in the Cloud: How on- and offline location-based social networks shape individual life chances

## 1 Summary

Neighbors matter and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic highlights this truth quite drastically: Neighborhoods are important sources of help and support in times of crisis. But neighborhoods also have an enduring effect in normal times. From educational attainment and job market integration to political participation or the everyday help elderly people receive (e.g., Bayer, Ross, and Topa, 2008; McClurg, 2006; Nieuwenhuis and Hooimeijer, 2016; Seifert and König, 2019): Neighborhoods, localized social networks, and other geographic contexts shape individual behavior by offering opportunities and imposing restrictions. Although the family and school context are often taken into account when examining educational outcomes (e.g., Hedman, Manley, and van Ham, 2019; Wodtke and Parbst, 2017), the role of other social networks (e.g., professional networks formed at one’s working place) has so far been largely neglected in the study of neighborhood effects (Petrović, Manley, and van Ham, 2019; Van Kempen and Wissink, 2014). More importantly, the role of localized online social networks is completely absent in the literature on neighborhood effects. At the same time, the stunning increase in neighborhood help initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted not only the importance of such localized networks but also demonstrated that they are increasingly organized online (Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2020).

The aims of this project are twofold: On the one hand, it assesses the simultaneous effects of multiple, often overlapping contexts and networks on people’s educational and labor market chances, political participation, and everyday support. This allows us to put neighborhood and other contextual effects into a broader perspective. On the other hand, as the first of its kind, the project assesses how localized social networks (i.e., among neighbors) also manifest in online networks and interactions. Can such location-based online communities provide support and resources that have previously mainly been accessible through face-to-face interactions? The internationally unique project will provide us with a comprehensive picture on how different on- and offline location-based networks shape life chances and inequalities in different spatial entities.

To rigorously test how localized on- and offline networks shape individual life chances and inequalities, new sources of data are needed. This is why a unique longitudinal survey will be set up to evaluate people’s neighborhood, work, and friendship networks. Using modified position generators, the survey will also assess to which extent place-based networks manifest themselves online across different geographic contexts. To model the interactions in small-scale, bespoke neighborhoods of door-to-door neighbors, participants are chosen by means of a stratified cluster random sampling (Zangger, 2019). Moreover, choice experiments and factorial surveys allow for the causal investigation of the underlying social mechanisms. Although the survey yields information on people’s use of location-based online networks, the extent of such networks and how information and resources diffuse therein is evaluated using web scraped data from public Twitter and Facebook posts and groups in Switzerland (Russell and Klassen, 2018). This approach will yield data that complement the insights on place-based online interactions obtained from the survey and provide first insights on how neighborhoods “in the cloud” also shape attitudes, decisions, and inequalities.

Combining traditional survey research with innovative methods, including modified survey experiments and big data approaches, the project will provide a comprehensive picture of neighborhood effects on people’s life chances. Simultaneously assessing the influence of different, often overlapping contexts and networks (e.g., friends, at one’s workplace), the project is unique in its direct assessment of the underlying social mechanisms of neighborhood effects and provides first intuitions on the role of location-based online interactions. Moreover, since data are collected in

different geographic contexts, the project also broadens the narrow focus of existing neighborhood effects studies that focus on urban areas. The potential and relevance of the project become even more apparent against the background of the multifold spontaneous neighborhood help initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, which were partly organized online. The project will make internationally valuable and unique contributions for the study of context-dependent individual life chances and inequalities. This knowledge and understanding could not have been more timely, relevant, and useful and will provide invaluable insights for location-based policy interventions.

## References

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