

Approaches to systematic social observation of neighborhoods across diverse settings

Barbara Entwisle, Heather Edelblute and Brian Frizzelle

Local environments are important to health and health outcomes, but the best way to measure them across diverse settings is not always so clear. This study explores systematic social observation (SSO) as a methodology and compares two approaches to collecting SSO data as part of the National Children's Study. The first and more standard approach to SSO data collection focuses on streets and street segments as units of observation. The second and potential alternative approach takes observations outside respondents' dwelling units as part of ongoing home-based interview. A spatial analysis of birth certificate data from Durham and Duplin counties in North Carolina is conducted to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each approach in terms of areal and road network coverage, efficiency and costs of data collection. Particular emphasis is given to urban-rural differences within and between each county.