

URBAN DENSITY AND ALTRUISM: HELPING STRANGERS IN A CANADIAN CITY, SUBURB, AND SMALL TOWN¹

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Summary.—Helping behavior was studied as a function of urban density. Four requests for help (for the time, for directions, for change of a quarter, and for the person's name) were solicited in three areas differing in population density (downtown in the Canadian city of Toronto, in the suburbs of the same city, in a small town outside of that city). On each measure the percentage of helping behavior decreased linearly as urban density increased. Normative data from New York City were also compared and found very similar to those from downtown Toronto. An absence of sex differences in either giving or eliciting help was noted.

It is something of a cliché nowadays to hear that increases in urban density lead to increases in "alienation," a lack of concern for other people, and a variety of serious social pathologies that range from crime and mental disorder to riots and war. Hard empirical data on this widespread belief are, however, apparently not so easy to find. In one extensive study carried out in New York City, for example, Freedman, Heshka, and Levy (1975) found that density, measured either as people per acre or persons per room, failed to predict such indices of social pathology as: juvenile delinquency, hospital admissions, or infant mortality, at least when such variables as ethnicity and income were controlled. These authors concluded that "humans do not generally have negative reactions to high density" (p. 551).

Altruism, the converse of social pathology, may be a useful dependent variable for the study of the problems of urban density. If the hypothesis that increasing urban density leads to increasing "alienation" and "pathology" is a correct one, then we might consider that indices of social integration, e.g., altruism, would show a decline before actual "pathologies" became evident. There is, in fact, some evidence that altruism decreases as a function of density. For example, Milgram (1970) provided evidence that city dwellers were less trusting (allowing a stranger into their house) and less helpful (telephoning a number for a caller who had run out of money and had dialed the subject's number in error) than town dwellers. Merrens (1973) found that city dwellers were less likely to respond to requests for help from passersby than town dwellers were. Korte and Kerr (1975) found on three different measures (request to make an important phone call; deliberate overpayment of money to a clerk;

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losing a stamped, addressed, postcard) that city people were less helpful than town dwellers. Finally Takooshian, Haber, and Lucido (1977) had a 6- to 10-yr.-old child stand on a busy street and say to passersby "I'm lost. Can you call my house?" Only 46% of people in big cities helped, whereas 72% of people in smaller towns did so.

All of the above studies directly compared a large city with a small town. The current study was carried out to see whether the above findings could (a) be replicated in a Canadian context, and (b) be generalized to a suburban setting as a mid-point between a "small town" and a "city."

METHOD

A variety of requests were asked of passersby in three different natural locations that differed in terms of urban population density. These requests were the same as those used previously by Latané and Darley (1970) and Merrens (1973). The percentages of people helping in each location were compared. In addition, these data were further compared with similarly gathered data from New York City (Latané & Darley, 1970).

Fifty-four students (42 female and 12 male) enrolled in a Social Psychology Laboratory Class served as the requesters of information. Their mean age was approximately 21 yr. As part of a class project, they divided into groups of four or five and each group gathered data from two sites. One of the two sites for each of the groups was in the downtown area of a large Canadian city (Metropolitan Toronto, pop. 2,125,000). The other site for each group was either a continuation of the same street in the northernmost suburbs of the same city or a continuation of the same street to a small town (pop. 16,250) some 15 miles north of the outer suburbs and 25 miles north of site number one.

All requests were made of people passing by on the sidewalk. Students were instructed to be as unselective as possible in the choices of passersby. While one person did the requesting, others stood nearby as observers. There were four possible requests, one of which was chosen in a random manner. These consisted of: "Excuse me, I wonder if you could . . ." (a) "tell me what time it is?", (b) "tell me how to get to the nearest post office?", (c) "give me change of a quarter?" and (d) "tell me what your name is?" These were among the same questions used by Latané and Darley (1970) with the exception that "nearest Post Office" had been substituted for "Times Square." The person was coded as "helping" if, in the judgments of both the requester and observers, he or she had made a conscious effort to help. Thus a person stopping and saying apologetically "I'm sorry, I can't" would be counted as helping. A person who refused to stop would be coded as "not helping." The sex of the requester and sex of the passerby were also recorded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Virtually no sex differences were found in either offering help or in receiving it. Of the six possible analyses, male \times female, in each of the three locations for each of the four requests, i.e., 72, sex differences were found on only two. Females were more able to elicit the names of passersby than were males (40% vs 20%; $\chi^2 = 5.89$, $df = 1$, $p < .02$) and male passersby were more helpful in this situation than were female passersby (40% vs 20%; $\chi^2 = 4.38$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). These findings were limited to this one request and to one location, i.e., the downtown Toronto area. No other sex differences were

found in the 70 other analyses. This is in line with the findings of Latané and Darley (1970) who used similar requests for help and also reported an absence of sex differences for these measures. Further analyses are thus collapsed over sex.

The percentage of people helping is shown as a function of locale and question asked, in Table 1; Latané and Darley's New York data are also shown. From Table 1 we can see that, considering the Toronto data, for each and every request, there is a drop in giving as urban density increases. The probability of getting this rank ordering by chance alone for one request is $1/3! = .17$. To get it four times in a row has an associated probability of $< .001$. When we consider the New York data, we see that the results are again in line with the hypothesis. However, there seems to be little difference between downtown Toronto and downtown New York.

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE HELPING IN RESPONSE TO TYPE OF REQUEST
IN AREAS DIFFERING IN URBAN DENSITY

Type of Request	Amount of Density							
	Low		Medium		High		High	
	Small Town		City Suburbs		Inner City		New York City*	
	% helping	Sample N	% helping	Sample N	% helping	Sample N	% helping	Sample N
Time	97 ^a	92	95 ^a	150	91 ^{ab}	272	85 ^b	92
Directions	97 ^a	85	90 ^{ab}	150	88 ^b	276	85 ^b	90
Change	84 ^a	100	73 ^{ab}	150	70 ^b	279	73 ^{ab}	90
Name	51 ^a	65	39 ^a	150	26 ^b	246	29 ^b	277

Note.—Within each type of request those having different superscripts are significantly different by chi square ($p < .05$).

*From Latané and Darley (1970).

These data replicate the finding that people in big cities are less altruistic than people in small towns (Korte & Kerr, 1975; Merrens, 1973; Milgram, 1970; Takooshian, *et al.*, 1977). It extends these findings to include a suburban setting falling midway in density between the city and the town. Corresponding middle scores in altruism were noted. Increases in urban density appear to be associated with decreases in helping behavior. A recent study by Newman and McCauley (1977) also included a middle category of suburbia in comparisons of city versus small town, using eye contact with strangers as the dependent variable. Like the current study, they too found the suburbs fell midway between town and city in the linear decrease in sociality.

There are several possible hypotheses to account for this negative relationship between urban density and helping. One is that people in cities are socialized differently than are people in smaller communities in consideration for others. There is evidence that this is the case. For example, when the setting

is held constant, the less urbanly dense the area the person was *raised* in, the more likely he was to engage in helping behavior. This was true for both laboratory situations (Latané & Darley, 1970) and naturalistic ones (Gelfand, Hartmann, Walker, & Page, 1973).

A quite different set of hypotheses suggest that life in big cities provides people with so many stressors (e.g., noise) that these lead to decreased altruism. Certainly it has been found that noise reduces helping (Korte, Ypma, & Toppen, 1975; Page, 1977). Indeed, Korte, *et al.*'s (1975) data, gathered in Holland, suggested that it was noise *per se* and not density that led to the decreases in altruism. How might stressors have their effects in decreasing altruism? One view would be that frustrations are produced which lead to increased aggression. In this analysis, not helping would be seen as a consciously hostile act. A somewhat different view would be that stressors lead to a generally "bad mood" and this depresses helping behavior perhaps by leading the person to become preoccupied with himself at the expense of others. There is certainly a welter of evidence that moods influence helping behavior (Rosenhan, Moore, & Underwood, 1976). Another hypothesis, related to stressors, concerns "stimulus overload." If stressors lead to generally increased cognitive arousal and a reduction in processing capacity, then perhaps people in big cities will defend against any additional stimulus input (Milgram, 1970).

Whatever the final explanations for the findings reported here, normative altruism might prove a useful dependent variable for researchers studying the effects of various parameters of population density on social behavior and "the quality of life."

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