

**EUROPEAN POPULATION CONFERENCE 2008  
9-12 July 2008, Barcelona**

**POPULATION AND WAY OF LIFE IN URBAN SPRAWL AREAS  
POSTER SESSION  
(poster content as extended abstract)**

**Authors:**

**Jordi Gavaldà (jgavalda@ub.edu)  
Gemma Vilà (gvila@ub.edu)**

**Research group in Territory, Population and Citizenship  
Department of Sociological Theory, Philosophy of Law  
and Methodology for Social Sciences  
UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA**

**Introduction**

The proliferation of urban dispersal in the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona is a widely consolidated process. Nonetheless, analysis of the population living in these areas, its characteristics and way of life is almost non-existent.

The aim of the investigation is to analyse different aspects of population settled in urban sprawl. Specifically, we are interested in population and households characteristics, mobility residential strategies, social relations, life spaces and management of time, family and adaptative strategies and participation and practice of civic values.

Some of the questions we'd like to answer through this research are: what socio-economic groups have been pushed to leave cities and relocate in low-density urbanisations? What adaptative strategies have families had to develop? What have been the implications of all this for everyday life, human relations, intergenerational solidarity and social cohesion? To what extent have these new dynamics exacerbated, or even generated new forms of social inequality?

Results shown in this poster are based in a R&D project entitled *Mobility, Family Solidarity and Civic Values in Metropolitan Regions*, financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology and ERDF funding. Much of the data presented is the result of a survey to 600 heads of family specifically designed for this study, along with in-depth interviews.

The territorial framework of reference is the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona (MRB). This consists of what is known as the real city of Barcelona as this represents the urban and functional reality of the municipality and its most direct area of influence. It occupies an area of 3,200 km<sup>2</sup> and is made up of 164 municipalities where 4,841,365 inhabitants live.

**Urban dispersal process in the MRB**

Although the beginnings of the construction of urbanisations go back to the 1960s and 1970s with self-constructed housing estates and second-home zones, the main process

began in the 1980s. The densely-settled Barcelona surrounded by peripheral districts changed into a heteroclitic urban reality spreading over an evermore extensive territorial area.

In recent years, housing development zones have multiplied throughout the MRB, consolidating a territorial model characterised by a juxtaposition of the typically Mediterranean compact city and low-density, dispersed urbanisation.

The large cities have lost population while smaller municipalities, whose growth is based on the typology of the single-family dwelling, continue to grow.

#### Mobility residential strategies

Year of arrival in the municipality and place of origin: the phenomenon of new housing areas outside the city is relatively recent as 70% of the interviewees have moved to their present homes since 1990. The new residents come from the MRB in 95% of cases.

Age of the new residents: of the residents in these dispersed settlements, 62.5% have moved before turning 40.

Reasons for the move: 52.7% of the residents state that they have changed their municipality of residence for reasons related with housing or surroundings. This valuation of the housing characteristics and the peace and quiet offered by low-density estates is more influential than family reasons.

#### Population and way of life in urban sprawl areas

This analysis is structured in five dimensions, which are population and households characteristics, social relations, life spaces and management of time, family and adaptative strategies and participation and practice of civic values.

##### *a) Population and households characteristics*

There are mainly two age groups living in analysed areas: in one hand, young people between 30 and 45 years old; in the other hand, aged people from 65 years old. This is like this because of the existence of two specific mobility residential dynamics that took place in different moments in the last 30 years. This situation explains a reality of two household categories: young couples (with or without children) and old people (living alone or coupled).

Low, medium and high socioeconomic groups can be found in these areas, although recently the medium ones are playing a leading role.

##### *b) Social relations*

Urban configuration is a key element in favouring or constraining social relations, although also influential are the previous social capital of the individuals concerned, personal motivations, availability of time for social activities, the moment in the family cycle and socioeconomic and cultural characteristics. Fragmentation of urban space,

increased physical distances and lack of public spaces are the most influential territorial characteristics.

- **Social relations:** living in a housing estate tends to reduce the frequency of encounters with friends: although 61.3% of the new residents in low-density areas say they see them with the same frequency as previously, 26.8% see them less frequently. A good part of these arise from and are structured around children:
- **Family relations:** similar pattern to that of social ones. While most indicate a lessening in family contacts, those who have relatives living in the same housing estate have a different perception: very slightly higher percentage who state that they have increased, and notable decrease for those who say that they have diminished.
- **Relations with neighbours:** almost all the new residents state that they know their neighbours, while a third of them indicate that they know only a few. On most occasions, the relationships are occasional and sporadic, so anonymity is a basic element that characterises relations between neighbours in a housing estate.

#### *c) Life spaces and management of time*

Life spaces, those used by members of the population in their everyday lives, are spread over a much greater area than those generally used by residents of compact urban zones. The longer people have lived in a place, the less the radius of the area of territory they frequent.

- **Work:** a large proportion of people work in Barcelona (25.7%) or in municipalities close to their homes (19.1%). With regards to travelling to and from work, use of the car is almost universal. The average travelling time for those who use private vehicle is 22 to 26 minutes, and it increases to as much as 44 minutes for those who use public transport, which is more common among women than men.
- **Shopping:** is rarely done in the housing estate because they uncommonly have a wide and varied offer of commercial establishments. Most people go to the small shops of their municipality as well as the big shopping and leisure centres.
- **Free time:** most people's free time is spent at home. Barcelona has ceased to be the place that concentrates leisure activities, although it is still significant.

#### *d) Family and adaptative strategies*

- **Characterisation:** homes in low-density areas trend to be bigger (3.2 people) than those in the compact districts (2.7) and the family members are usually younger. The majority are nuclear families of couples with children (51%).
- **Forms of family organisation:** the distribution of domestic work in the family is unequal between the sexes since women devote 29.4 hours a week to domestic tasks while men spend 13.3 hours. The presence of dependents tends to increase the disparity between the sexes.
- 28% of the families delegate tasks in the domestic-family work to a paid helper.

*e) Participation and practice of civic values*

- Membership in associations and time devoted: 29.8% of the residents are members of some or other entity (1.2 entities on average per resident), mainly sports clubs and neighbourhood associations. 57.7% of the residents devote some time to associations (8.3 hours per month on average per resident).
- Use of spaces for social gatherings: the most used facilities are leisure centres (30%), sporting facilities (22%) and social centres (17%).
- Events and festivities: housing estates show a lower level of leisure and social activities than in the centre of the city (65% and 95.3% respectively). Among those respondents that say that they sometimes attend functions, 7 out of 10 recognise that this is only occasional. Membership in some association predisposes people to participate in these activities more assiduously, whether they are members of the organising entity or not.
- Civic events of interest to the community: analysis has been carried out of attendance over the last year in plenary sessions of the Councils, neighbourhood meetings or events aimed at mobilisation over matters pertaining to the housing estate or beyond. Almost half the residents show a level of zero attendance. When attendance levels increase, percentages for each of the categories diminish. Being a member of an association significantly increases attendance (percentages 10% higher than the average).