CultureCase

Using an 'Index of Access' to measure the geographic inquality of cultural amenities

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Summary

This paper investigated the ways in which residents of Detroit, Michigan experienced different levels of ‘access to cultural amenities’ in the city. The research was prompted by inequities revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter. Overall, the research found that ‘historically under-represented populations – racial and ethnic minorities and economically-disadvantaged populations’ had lower levels of access to cultural organisations in the city – especially galleries, museums and performing arts. Overcoming unequal levels of access requires appropriate forms of outreach to areas with identified needs around transport and mobility. One idea is to provide subsidised transport as part of a cultural offer. In cities like Detroit, collaborating with libraries might be an effective way to provide cultural services to communities with access requirements.

The study examined 335 non-profit cultural organisations across five sub-sectors

Organisations included in the study comprised: 28 visual arts organisations (e.g. Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit); 15 science organisations, including zoos; 87 music and performing arts organisations (e.g. Detroit Symphony Orchestra); 70 historical organisations (e.g. Henry Ford Museum), and 135 libraries. The research built an ‘Index of Access’ for each organisation, based on whether it had free admission, how close it was by foot, bicycle, car or public transport, and the level of private car ownership in the area. The research was not concerned with the programming or audiences for these organisations.

The Index of Access also tended to correlate with other measures of privilege or exclusion

The neighbourhoods which fell into the ‘highest access zones’ for Detroit’s arts and culture organisations had ‘fewer ethnic minorities, fewer people with less than a Bachelor’s degree, and higher household income’. The Index revealed that, in general, libraries were ‘more accessible as compared to the other sub-fields’ like visual arts organisations.

Keywords

cities **USA** **access** **neighbourhood**

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