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***PARENTAL CHOICE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION:
SOCIO-SPATIAL DYNAMICS AND MOTIVATION***

by

EDWARD MICHAEL PARSONS

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth

in partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Geographical Sciences

Faculty of Science

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***PARENTAL CHOICE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION:
SOCIO-SPATIAL DYNAMICS AND MOTIVATION***

EDWARD MICHAEL PARSONS

This thesis has two main aims. First, to establish whether the strengthening in 1988 of the right of parents to choose a secondary school for their child has led to increased travel to out-of-catchment schools in a case study area. Second, to identify the extent of socio-spatial variation of patterns and trends in choice of school. Secondary school transfer data relating to over 16,000 children for 1991 and 1993 to 1995 was analysed in a Geographical Information System (GIS). One hundred and sixty two parents of children about to transfer to secondary school were interviewed with the objective of revealing the contextual factors underlying the patterns and trends of pupil movements identified in the course of the GIS analysis. The practice and outcomes of parental choice were examined at four scales: the parent, the neighbourhood, the school and the LEA Area. Whilst the main value of this thesis lies in its presentation of empirical evidence of the socio-spatial outcomes of school choice, the results are placed in the context of relevant theoretical perspectives.

The study finds that the proportion of children transferring to out-of-catchment secondary school has increased between 1991 and 1995 but that any increase in parental choice is constrained by a variety of factors that interact in complex ways to produce substantial socio-spatial variation in its expression. It is concluded that policy and practice relating to school choice can substantially affect educational equity and efficiency. It is recommended that the operation of local education markets be more closely monitored by LEAs and that GIS analysis, as used in this study, is an important tool for this purpose.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

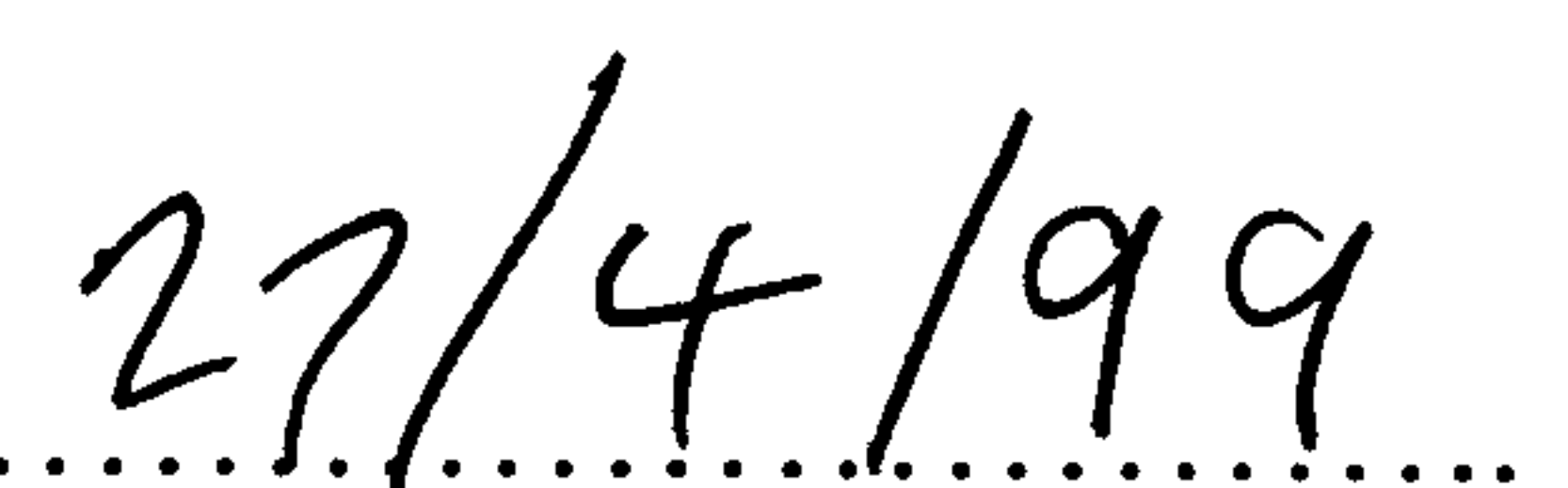
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Signed.....

Dated.....

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the study.

Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997 implemented a body of legislation that profoundly changed the administrative, financial and academic framework within which UK secondary schools operate. One of the key educational aims in this period was to provide parents with greater rights in their choice of their children's school. Liberalised school choice has played a central role in the attempt to create a competitive market in the provision of secondary education and the 1997-elected Labour government appears unlikely to alter radically this particular aspect of Conservative educational policy. Parental choice of secondary school has featured in political debate since the early 1970s, but its key place amongst the policies introduced by the 1988 Education Reform Act ensured that this issue has become a focus of considerable public controversy, as well as the subject of widespread academic debate.

A number of concerns about the consequences of parental choice have been raised in the extensive literature on this topic. These range from the practical problems of planning and management within an uncertain market environment to the likelihood that the least affluent and well-educated parents will be disadvantaged in their access to the most popular schools. Such considerations are, on the whole, rooted in the assumption that liberalised parental choice has led, or will lead, to greater fluidity of pupil movement, with traditional secondary school catchments becoming less meaningful as parents increasingly assert their right to express a preference for an alternative to the local school. On the other hand, the literature suggests that convenience of access remains a significant factor for many parents in their choice of school. Awareness of this tension between more active expression of parental

choice and a general preference for a local school has not been reflected by a substantial research effort examining the empirical effects of the 1988 Act on the geographical patterns of schools' intakes. The limited research in this area has generally been of a cross-sectional nature, so that it is difficult to tell whether the patterns revealed are static or dynamic.

There are good reasons for the dearth of empirical research addressing the extent to which the 'push' of the new educational market has overcome the 'pull' of allegiance to the local school. One of these is the technical difficulty of mapping variations in pupil movement in the context of the local education system. There is a preponderance of studies addressing the micro-level or qualitative view of parental choice processes while ignoring the wider pattern, probably arising from educational researchers' lack of familiarity with the tools, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), that are most suited to the analysis of spatial change. This thesis aims to help redress this imbalance by investigating the extent to which there has been temporal and spatial change in pupil-movements in the case-study area.

Research into the effects of liberalised parental choice is important for several reasons. If catchments are indeed becoming more permeable with increased pupil-flows across their boundaries, then it will be valuable for all concerned in educational planning to understand the character of such changes. Such understanding requires the investigation of the temporal and spatial dynamics of changing patterns of school intake and the characterisation of the types of parents who are choosing out-of-catchment schools. This is particularly important for the schools as their funding now depends almost entirely on the number of pupils they attract. Any diminution in their ability to rely on local children for their intake may affect their character or level of educational attainment and, in extreme cases, lead to major budget reductions or even their closure. Parents, meanwhile, may be faced with a choice process of

greatly increased complexity and uncertainty. An understanding of the ways in which they are responding to this new era of choice and the socio-economic variation in their responses, will tell us a great deal about the extent to which changing patterns of school choice are likely to be lasting trends and about the consequences for the schools, the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and society as a whole.

This thesis has its roots in a small-scale pilot study undertaken in 1993 with the co-operation of an LEA. Records of 1991 year-6 pupils, that is children in their final year of primary school, including pupils' home locations and the school to which they transferred, were analysed in a Geographical Information System (GIS). The results of this first study revealed a complex set of flows that could not be fully explained without further research. In particular, it was felt that a much larger, longitudinal study would provide a greatly enhanced picture of pupil-flows and so the work outlined in this thesis was prepared and planned.

This research focuses on a case-study area exhibiting a diversity of social, geographical and educational features that make it a suitable 'natural laboratory' for the study of the effects of parental choice on the permeability of school catchments. Analysis of pupil data covering the period from 1991 to 1995 reveals the extent to which out-of-catchment movement is increasing. The geographical patterns and changes demonstrated are, at least partially, the outcome of parental decision-making processes. Explanatory value is added to the study by a survey of parents that attempts to identify the factors influencing these processes.

Three terminological points should be addressed before progressing further. First, the 1980 Education Act and 1988 Education Reform Act only gave parents a right to express a preference for a particular secondary school which would not necessarily be satisfied if the school was over-subscribed. Nevertheless, the phrase 'parental choice' will be used rather

than the more accurate ‘parental preference’ throughout this thesis. This reflects the common usage by the press, politicians and academics in recent years. Second, the unqualified term ‘catchment’ in this thesis will always refer to the *de jure* catchment defined by the LEA as part of the secondary school transfer system, whereas the actual area from which a school draws its intake will be referred to as the *de facto* catchment. Third, the term catchment *permeability* is used throughout this thesis. This refers to the tendency for pupils to cross a school’s catchment boundary, either travelling from local homes to schools in other catchments or moving in the other direction, from homes in other catchments to the local school.

1.2 Scope and aims.

This study recognises the complexity of the environment within which parents choose secondary schools, and the variety of issues of interest to academics. The landscape of parental choice is complex and can be seen as “constituted by the politics of space (different conceptions and use of the lived environment), closely related to the distribution of, both material and cultural capital (family finance and ‘knowing the system’), the impact of the language of ‘choice’ and modes of consumption (how and if parents choose) and the particularities of local circumstance (how LEAs and schools work on and in the landscape) - all of which are powerfully inscribed by the presence of class, gender and race” (Bowe *et al*, 1994: 76). As far as possible, this thesis attempts to put the quantitative story of pupil movements arising from parental choice into these distinctive contexts. However, the combination of the complexity of the subject and the constrained research resources necessarily circumscribes the scope and objectives of the study. The primary aim of this research is the assessment of the extent to which school catchments in the case-study area have become more permeable. The secondary aim is to characterise the factors that explain

why some catchments are more permeable than others. This evaluation extends to such factors as demography, the socio-economic characteristics of catchments, school intakes and of parents, catchment shape, transport availability and the influence of LEA procedures and school marketing. While there is some interpretation of the implications of the results for debates, such as that on the social equity of the parental choice system, this is primarily an empirical rather than a strongly theoretical study.

1.3 Methodology.

The research was essentially a case study and inevitably such an approach raises questions about how far it is possible to generalise from its findings. However, as stated previously, the case-study area contains within it a wide range of social and educational settings of interest to the parental choice researcher, with the major exception of significant ethnic or religious groups. Furthermore, it will be argued that the range of educational provision in England and Wales is so diverse that any highly aggregated study will inevitably over-simplify reality by omitting local contextual information directly relevant to the results of any analysis. As far as possible, the extent to which the area is representative of the rest of the country will be considered by placing the results of this study in the context of research into choice elsewhere in Britain.

The research design recognises that different processes may be occurring at different levels of society and focuses on four different scales of analysis, namely the parent, the neighbourhood, the school, and the LEA area. The heart of the research is the analysis of year-six pupil data covering the period from 1991 to 1995 with the aim of identifying changes in the patterns of flows of pupils from home to school. Geo-demographic profiling enables the flows to be characterised by the social classification of the home neighbourhood and the

school catchment. The use of GIS in educational research of this type has been rare. Thus, the spatial analysis to which GIS is suited makes it possible to address the types of locational questions that have been neglected by parental choice research in the past.

GIS analysis unsupported by other evidence, however, would leave the research open to criticism for failing to reveal the underlying motivations and socio-economic characteristics of the individual parents who choose an out-of-catchment school (and of those who do not). Therefore, the GIS analysis is backed up by interviews with parents of children who were about to transfer to secondary school. The parents were randomly selected from a sample stratified by catchment. So that other influences on parental choice were not excluded from the analysis, further background research was undertaken, including visits to school open days/evenings and interviews with LEA staff and secondary Heads.

1.4 Ethical Issues

One condition imposed by the secondary school Heads, in return for their co-operation in this study, was a requirement that individual schools should be unidentifiable in the PhD thesis and any published research stemming from it. This demand reflected the Heads' apprehensions of 'market-sensitive' research findings, such as trends in school popularity, becoming public. This limitation applied both to the naming of schools and to the presentation of findings in any conventional cartographic representation, such that individual schools could be easily identified. Consequently, certain artifices have been used. The case study area in this thesis is referred to as 'Eastland' and the major urban area 'Northwick'. Individual schools have been allocated alpha-numeric codes and geographical features, and school catchment boundaries have been generalised in figures (though not for the GIS analysis). Fuller details of these alterations are given where appropriate in the text.

Particular care was also taken to ensure that the confidentiality and interests of pupils and parents were respected. No data that would allow identification of individuals, other than the LEA's unique pupil number, were supplied by the LEA to the researcher. The LEA was supplied by the author with the unique pupil numbers of those children whose parents had been selected for interview in the parental survey. They then sent a covering letter to those sampled, together with the researcher's request for an interview. Thus, parents only became known to the researcher when they responded to this request for interview. The questionnaire content and survey design had previously been approved by the University Ethics Committee.

1.5 Thesis contents.

This introduction ends with an outline of the thesis contents. Chapter 2 provides a history of UK educational legislation relevant to parental choice, providing the political and legislative context for the rest of the study. Chapter 3 contains a review of theoretical perspectives that were considered useful in both understanding the issues and designing the methodology in this study. This discussion is followed by a review of the issues raised by previous studies, some critique of these studies and a detailed outline of the objectives of this research. Chapter 4 considers the case-study context. The geography and educational history of the case-study area are described with particular emphasis on the evolution of the current catchment system: the system for secondary school transfer is also outlined. Chapter 5, which explains the methodology used in the GIS analysis, provides the platform for Chapter 6 which describes the results of this analysis. In so doing it reveals the extent to which catchments are more permeable, and categorises them according to permeability and socio-economic characteristics. Similarly, Chapters 7 and 8 respectively describe the social survey methodology and results, with the latter chapter placing the analysis of the interview responses in the context of the patterns revealed by the GIS analysis. Chapter 9 discusses the

overall results, brings together the different facets of the study, outlines the conclusions arising from this work and makes recommendations for further research and for policy.

Chapter 2. The historical development of parental choice in secondary education

2.1 Introduction.

The 1988 Education Reform Act radically altered the structure and operation of the British secondary education system. The partnership between central government, local authorities and teachers that characterised the educational landscape created by the 1944 Education Act has been transformed into a market-based system operating within a centrally controlled regulatory framework. Through mechanisms such as open enrolment, parents have been cast by government in the role of consumers of education, while schools, with considerable devolved powers and responsibilities, have substantially increased freedom to compete for each year's new intake of pupils.

The Thatcher and Major governments initiated an educational revolution with the 1988 Act and other legislation, which appears unlikely to be substantially reversed by the current Labour government. While the importance of these changes is clear, the effects on parents, schools and society are sometimes difficult to discern and frequently contested. Furthermore, there is great diversity in local responses to the legislation. For example, there continues to be substantial variation between different local authorities in admission arrangements to secondary schools (Mayet, 1995). In particular, geographical catchments, emblematic of the post-1944 system and arguably redundant in an age of open enrolment are, nonetheless, still used by many LEAs as part of the procedures for admission to secondary school. The degree to which the traditional catchment system is breaking down, and the importance of this and other spatial influences for parental choice, is the subject of this thesis.

An understanding of the present-day role of catchment systems and the importance of other socio-spatial factors in parental choice of secondary school requires knowledge of the development of relevant educational legislation. This chapter is intended to provide that background. The pre-1944 system is briefly outlined. The limited attention given to parental choice in the drafting and implementation of the 1944 Education Act is contrasted with the importance placed on equality of opportunity and selectivity. The subsequent shift from selection to comprehensive secondary education is then discussed in the context of the desire in some quarters for increased equality of outcome. In the 1970s mounting pressure for contraction of the secondary school system, and greater parental choice, arose from a variety of sources. The influence of these factors on subsequent legislation is discussed. The relevant features of post-1979 Conservative government legislation affecting secondary schools, most notably the 1988 Education Reform Act, are described. The chapter continues with a statement of the current legal position regarding secondary school admissions procedures and school transport, with a specific focus on the status of school catchments. Finally, there is a brief summary of the policies of the 1997 Labour government regarding parental choice and secondary transfer.

Parental choice is, of course, mediated by many factors other than the legislative framework. The decisions of parents and their children may be influenced by a variety of considerations, among them peer group pressure, economic factors, media reports about schools and LEA administrative procedures. In turn, the consequences of parental decisions may affect the development of local educational systems. This chapter is predominantly concerned with providing a historic outline of relevant developments in the UK educational system with strictly limited concern for theoretical perspectives. Chapter 3 will review

recent empirical and theoretical research into the impact of parental choice legislation on parents, schools and society as a whole.

2.2 Historical background: pre-1944.

Before the 1944 Education Act the majority of young children only received an elementary education. The parental choice that existed was primarily based on financial means and reflected social class. “Throughout English history the second stage of education had been essentially a means of preparing a specific group of young persons, selected by birth, patronage or ability for the particularly important social and economic roles which they would be likely to assume in adult life” (Aldrich, 1982). Until the late nineteenth century middle- and upper-class children were educated at home, or in exclusive public schools, a range of private schools or the old grammar schools. Provision for working-class children was either absent or in charity schools that were often little more than child-minding services for working mothers (Walford 1994). However, the need for a better-educated and disciplined workforce, together with religious and philanthropic interests, led to the gradual increase of schooling for the poor.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the first foundations of modern universal secondary education were laid. The 1880 Education Act required school attendance for all children between the ages of 5 and 13 (with certain exceptions for over 10s). However, there was considerable geographic variation in the extent of school provision. Rate-aided Board schools were isolated and unconnected to voluntary (charitable) schools, there was insufficient training for teachers and there was a lack of coherent links between the primary and secondary stages of education. The education system of the late 19th century clearly needed unified control. The 1902 Education Act was intended to rectify this lack of cohesion (Balfour in Maclure, 1968). LEAs were introduced with each authority required to “consider the educational needs of their area and take such

steps as seem to them desirable, to supply or aid the supply of education other than elementary, and to promote the general co-ordination of all forms of education...” (Education Act, 1902). The central Board of Education (a national government body) was provided with the power to regulate and inspect the operation of schools but had no initiatory power (Maclure, 1968). It was the newly established LEAs who were, through this and subsequent Acts, able to establish common admission arrangements for secondary schools, including the establishment of catchment systems. Central government could and did provide guidance, but the delegation of authority over local education provision to LEAs allowed a diversity of secondary transfer procedures that has persisted to this day.

In the period before the 1944 Act the desirability of a uniform, national system of education providing access for all, and the question of how different types of children should be educated, dominated the educational debate. The Hadow Report of 1926 was a most important influence in the resolution of the latter issue. The report recommended the establishment of universal secondary education. Following six years of primary schooling, children successful in an entrance examination would attend the traditional grammar school, with the rest educated at ‘modern secondary schools’ with a more practical bias, at least partially reflecting the needs of local industry and commerce (Maclure, 1968). It should be noted that, before Hadow, determination of the type of school children should attend was mainly based on social and financial rather than intellectual considerations (Hyndman, 1978). Hadow’s report, strongly influenced by contemporary educational psychologists, initiated a reorganisation of schools into a uniform system along selective lines that began in the 1930s with the changes later formalised by the 1944 Act (Maclure, 1968). Selection rather than choice was the keynote of the contemporary educational debate.

Before the 1944 Education Act, however, arguments in favour of individual parental choice of school were occasionally heard. Stillman and Maychell (1986) cite John Stuart Mill's case, in his essay 'On Liberty', in favour of a system of school choice for all, and they refer also to Cardinal Bourne's proposal in 1926 for parents to be provided with warrants entitling them to education at any suitable neighbourhood school. Such arguments were relatively rare, however, and Stillman and Maychell warn against taking them out of the context of their time. In particular, Cardinal Bourne's arguments was based on the supposed financial inequity of Roman Catholic and Anglican parents paying for their children to attend confessional schools when state education was free. The 1921 Education Act, permitting parents to select a denominational school of their own faith for their children, contained the sole legislation in favour of parental choice in the first half of the twentieth century, up to and including the 1944 Act. Choice of school, in the context of the 1944 Act, was perceived in terms of freedom to attend a preferred denominational school in contrast to the much more wide-ranging concept it represents today. R. A. Butler's landmark White Paper 'Educational Reconstruction', published in 1943, nowhere mentions parents' wishes, this reflecting the lack of interest in non-denominational choice compared with securing the effective provision of education for all.

To summarise, the considerable educational legislation in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century substantially increased the availability of secondary education to all segments of the population and many new schools were built. However, the extent and nature of secondary education provision before the 1944 Act varied considerably between different LEAs (Banks, 1955). The 1944 Education Act established a secondary school system for the first time that existed within a uniform and national framework. The consequences of this Act are now considered.

2.3 The 1944 Education Act.

The 1944 Act marked the culmination of the transition from an education system in which school attendance generally depended on one's class or income, to one where ability was the supposed determinant of the appropriate education for a child. The popular unity that helped win the Second World War demanded an education system which was intended to create a more "just, open and modern" society, in contrast to the divided, impoverished society of the 1930s depression (Ranson, 1990b). Equality of opportunity was the goal, and selection by ability the mechanism that would secure it. Parental choice was not envisaged as playing any significant role in the progression from primary to secondary school.

The Act set up the dual/tripartite system of educational provision through selective grammar, secondary modern and (more rarely) technical schools. LEAs were given responsibility for allocating children to secondary schools. Whether a child went to a grammar or secondary modern was decided by their success or failure in the 11-plus examination. Whatever the result of the 11-plus, however, the allocation of children to schools was generally based on a formal geographical catchment system with parents only being offered the local school. In effect, there were two overlying catchment maps, with children living in both the catchment of the local secondary school and of the larger catchment of the nearest grammar school (Walford, 1990, 1994). Importantly, the majority of schools owned and controlled by the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church were integrated into the state system, allowing LEAs comprehensively to plan and control primary and secondary education (excepting private schools).

One of the key features of the Act was the creation of the triangular power structure in education that was to endure for 40 years. The structure can be modelled as follows: the Minister and his departmental officials controlled education centrally through promotion of

policy and the supply of funding at a broad, strategic level; LEAs provided a schooling system to match local needs in line with their statutory responsibilities; while professional teachers developed the curriculum and appropriate teaching methods, taking some account of parental wishes (Ranson, 1990a).

Parental wishes about choice of school itself were not, however mentioned in the 1944 draft bill and it was not until the lack of reference to a religious opt-out was raised that the issue of parental choice was debated in Parliament. This debate focused exclusively on the right of Anglican and Catholic parents to send their children to an appropriate denominational school, in the context of the Act's integration of Anglican and Catholic schools into the state system (Stillman, 1990). Section 76 was added as a consequence of this debate, forming the first major legislative definition of the extent of parental choice:

“In the exercise and performance of all powers and duties conferred and imposed on them by this Act the Minister (Secretary of State) and local education authorities shall have regard to the general principle that, so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of the parents.”

(1944 Education Act, s76).

This wording now appears surprisingly ambiguous and open-ended, but, for those involved in the debate, this was intended as a reference to denominational concerns (Stillman & Maychell, 1986). However, the lack of any explicit reference to religion and the use of the phrase ‘General Principle’ in the heading led, in later years, to more being read into the Act than was initially intended.

Section 68 allowed appeals and complaints to the Minister if it could be argued that the LEA was acting unreasonably with respect to their powers under the Act. A small number

of parents used the section to appeal to the Minister claiming that refusal of particular non-denominational schools by the LEA contravened the requirement of Section 76 that “pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents” (Stillman and Maychell, 1986). The Ministry Of Education, concerned about the nature of these appeals, decided to issue guidelines on how the Minister would deal with cases of parental preference that would involve extra expenditure by the LEA so that the authorities could rationalise their own procedures (Stillman & Maychell, 1986). The 1946 Circular 83 (Choice of Schools) published by the Department of Education and Science (DES) gave four grounds that parents could use to justify choice of school: the denominational character of the school, preference for an existing school of a single sex or mixed type, convenience of access, or educational considerations such as the provision of a particular type of advanced work in an individual school (DES, 1946:1). This was the first government publication to allow educational considerations as a justification for choice.

The Circular also contained the declaration that “as much freedom should be given to the parents in the choice of individual schools of the appropriate type within the area as is consistent with efficient organisation and reasonable economy of public expenditure”(DES, 1946: 1). This paragraph encapsulates the conflict at the heart of much discussion of parental choice. Adler *et al* (1989) contrast the *authority-wide* approach to school admissions with the *child-centred approach*. The former view is concerned with ensuring that schools are neither over-crowded nor under-enrolled. A balanced academic and social intake may also be seen as desirable. Catchment systems are a traditional administrative tool for the achievement of all these kinds of objectives. These priorities may be seen to reflect an efficient use of resources by an education authority. By contrast, the child-centred view seeks to fit pupils to the schools most suited to their needs. Parents choosing a school may consider non-academic factors, such as discipline, or seek schools with an academic or

social mix that suits their child. Such an approach may well conflict with that of the local authority because of the danger of unpopular schools with low class numbers becoming less efficient, whilst popular schools require expensive expansion. Most LEAs have operated somewhere between the authority-wide and child-centred models, though the exact position has varied both temporally and spatially.

The profound post-war shake-up of the educational system arising from the 1944 Act was followed by a period of stability that lasted until the 1964 Labour government. There was no significant legislation and only limited concern about parental choice. This is reflected in the low rate of appeals dealt with by the Secretary of State during this period: around a hundred a year in the early 1960s. Most disputes were resolved at the local level (Tweedie, 1986). The only extension of parental rights in their choice of school was contained in the Ministry of Education 'Manual of Guidance: Schools No 1' issued in 1950 and entitled 'Choice of Schools'. Family association with a particular school was added to the range of valid grounds for choice, though again, such considerations had to be balanced against LEA efficiency factors. The balance of power between parents and LEAs over choice of secondary school continued to favour the LEA in these years (Stillman and Maychell, 1986). The pressures and circumstances that would transform this balance would not emerge distinctively into public debate until the 1970s.

2.4 Parental choice in the 1960s and 1970s.

The most significant development within secondary education in the 1960s and 1970s was the shift towards a predominantly comprehensive system. Where children lived became much more important in deciding the secondary school they attended than their IQ at the age of 11. The post-war focus on universal educational provision and equality of opportunity was gradually replaced by a concern with educational outcomes, for different

socio-economic groups and for individual children. However, as comprehensive education became the norm, perceived dissatisfaction with educational quality grew. This section will describe how this dissatisfaction, combined with a projected decline in the secondary school population and a requirement to reduce public spending, were synergistic factors in the emergence of parental choice of secondary school as a genuine political issue.

The pressure for movement towards comprehensive education arose from a wide range of groups and individuals with a variety of motives (Ball, 1984). There was particular concern about the equity and reliability of IQ tests as a means of selection. The consensus about meritocratic principles expressed in the 1944 Act was diluted by the publication of the Crowther and Newsom reports, in 1959 and 1963 respectively, which revealed the importance of environmental factors on educational outcomes and 11-plus results (Feintuck, 1994). A further stimulus for change was the strong demand for 'grammar school-like' education from an expanding middle class with rising expectations from education (Walford, 1994). However, few new grammar schools had been built to cater for the post-war demographic bulge so that middle class parents in many areas found their children attending secondary modern schools that they perceived (usually correctly) as inferior in teaching quality and resources. This concern about individual children was "transmuted to a call for greater equality of educational opportunity for all and greater national efficiency through avoiding the 'waste' of talent going to secondary moderns" (Walford, 1994: 22). Comprehensive secondary education was proposed as the solution to this problem.

The Labour Party instigated the expansion of comprehensive education with the publication of the DES Circular 10/65, 'The Organisation of Secondary Schooling'. Local authorities were encouraged to reorganise secondary education along comprehensive lines

whilst the government understood that “the method and timing of such reorganisation should vary to meet local needs” (DES, 1965: 1), this being a recognition of the diversity of local circumstances.

The practical result of the new policy was a gradual switch by the great majority of LEAs to the comprehensive system. In 1951 less than 1 per cent of secondary age children in the maintained sector attended comprehensive schools. For 1961 the figure was 5 per cent, in 1971 35 per cent and by 1981 it had risen to 90 per cent. In 1988 only about 150 grammar schools remained (Walford, 1994). However, once again the apparent national uniformity of the reformed education system was misleading and there continued to be considerable heterogeneity of provision amongst local authorities.

In particular, central government had not imposed on LEAs a uniform system of allocating children to secondary school and there was considerable variation in local practice. Although many LEAs, particularly in rural areas, operated formal catchment area policies, offering one school only to parents, some offered a wider choice of schools, whilst a small minority retained selective grammar schools (Stillman & Maychell, 1986). There was also variation in the way school catchments were devised. True comprehensive education requires the presence of the full ability range in a school’s pupils. Some advocates of comprehensive education believed that it should also ensure that the full socio-economic range was represented in an individual school, raising the aspirations for some, diminishing class barriers for all (Walford, 1994). A number of LEAs did implement complex secondary school catchment mosaics so that desirable social mixes would be achieved (Petch, 1988). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the great majority of comprehensive schools served their immediate neighbourhood irrespective of the socio-economic composition of the area.

One factor which tended to stimulate demand for parental choice within the new system was the persistence of heterogeneity in the system as former grammar and secondary modern schools often maintained their old ethos and practices whilst the variable quality of new comprehensive schools often reflected the socio-economic characteristics of their catchments. Ball (1988) argues that comprehensive reform never really happened; one set of inequalities and divisions was merely replaced by another. Selection for different schools was less open “and probably *more* unfair because the criteria for selection became more confused” (Walford, 1994: 23). House purchase within a school’s catchment boundary was just one method of securing a place at a ‘better quality’ comprehensive. Another way of getting children into a favoured school was through the appeals system, the increasing use of which in time gave a major impetus to the development of parental choice policy.

Appeals to the Secretary of State against allocations of school made under Section 68 of the 1944 Act rose dramatically. In the early 1960s there were only about a hundred a year; a decade later the annual total was over a thousand a year (Tweedie, 1986). Although the great majority of these appeals were unsuccessful and represented a tiny proportion of total transfers, the 1974 - 1979 Labour Government, as well as the Conservative opposition, increasingly perceived that they must represent a demand for more parental choice.

Another stimulus to the development of parental choice policy was the prospect of declining school populations (Stillman & Maychell, 1986). Demographic factors have been an important consideration in parental choice policy for both main parties. There was a 30 per cent fall in the number of 10 year-olds in England and Wales between the peak in 1975 (derived from the 1960s baby boom) and 1987 (Walford, 1994). This decline in pupil population inevitably led to over-provision in secondary schools. Crucially, the excess

capacity arose at a time of economic restructuring following the 1973 oil price rises when public expenditure was under severe attack. Rather than consolidating and refurbishing the secondary system in anticipation of future rising rolls, both Labour and Conservatives committed themselves to reducing educational funding (Lawrence, 1992). Parental choice, in this context, was seen as a way of delegating to parents responsibility for deciding those schools which were to close. The increase in spare capacity would ensure that the more popular schools could satisfy a moderate increase in demand.

The 1970s public-sector funding crisis coincided with the displacement of educational egalitarianism as the focus of educational debate by a concern for a perceived decline in educational standards, particularly in comprehensive schools (Feintuck, 1994). Right-wing educationalists and politicians produced the Black Papers, a series of reports on education alleging a serious decline in academic standards and discipline in comprehensive schools. Such concerns were not, however, limited to the Conservative Party and its supporters. James Callaghan, in a landmark speech at Ruskin College in October 1976, attacked a teacher-controlled curriculum that was portrayed as failing to meet the vocational needs of the country. He was undoubtedly influenced by complaints from industrialists about the educational standards of the workforce they were recruiting (Lawrence, 1992). This speech symbolised a change in the educational political consensus and marked the beginning of the transformation of the traditional alignment of power away from teachers and LEAs and towards national government, individual schools and parents that has continued to this day.

The 1974-1979 Labour governments failed to implement any radical restructuring of the educational system. The 1979 election defeat reprieved many of the remaining grammar schools that had been sentenced to death by the 1976 Education Act. It also ensured the loss of the 1978 Education Bill which, amongst a number of other reforms to the 1944 Act,

claimed significantly to increase parental choice and contained a clause obliging LEAs to provide information to help parents make choices. However, the overall effect of this legislation would have been to increase the managerial powers available to LEAs for dealing with the restructuring of educational provision necessitated by falling rolls. Cutting public expenditure had more priority than parental rights in choice of school (Lawrence, 1992).

In summary, the combination of public spending cuts and falling rolls helped to create an economic climate where ideas favouring parental choice of school could begin to flourish. Furthermore, the rising level of parental appeals was seen as symptomatic of a rising concern with educational quality, acknowledged by both of the main political parties. The development of Conservative policy to address these issues, together with their specific ideological context, is considered next.

2.5 The roots of recent Conservative policy on parental choice of secondary school.

Before the 1980 Education Act most LEAs allocated children to schools on the basis of formal catchments (Walford, 1990). These were convenient tools for management of secondary school systems. Demographic projections for the different catchments allowed reasonably efficient forward planning of the building and teaching requirements of future cohorts. If parents wished their children to attend an out-of-catchment school, it was their responsibility to prove that any objection to the local school was reasonable. Each LEA had its own arrangements and criteria for dealing with appeals and the LEA effectively controlled secondary education provision and management, apart from private schools, which provided places for about 7% of pupils in England.

The post-1979 Conservative educational legislation, culminating in the 1988 Education Reform Act, drastically reduced the powers of the LEAs. Essentially, a market system was established whereby the de-centralisation of financial and management powers from LEAs to schools motivated the latter to compete for the children, as parents became consumers with greatly enhanced power of choice. In particular, pupil-led funding, whereby the great majority of a school's income depends on the number of pupils it can attract, encouraged increased competition between schools. The introduction of a national curriculum, together with the institution of standard tests at various ages and the requirement for schools' examination results to be published, allowed parents to make crude comparisons of academic performance. Inevitably, these changes had a profound effect on the traditional LEA-managed catchment systems. This section examines the ideological and practical roots of the new arrangements.

Ranson (1990b) proposes three overlapping phases in the evolution of Conservative policy. An initial phase (1969 - 1977), comprising an attack on comprehensive educational standards, articulated through the Black Papers, that was accompanied by a call for increased parental power. A second phase (1974 - 1984), linking educational quality to consumer accountability, began with the publication of 'The Parent's Charter' and included the passing of the 1980 Education Act. Finally, the period from 1984 to 1988 was characterised by a radical revolution in parental rights that culminated in the 1988 Education Reform Act, which effectively established a market (or quasi-market) in secondary education. In all three phases the rights of the individual, and the greater efficiency and quality of a market-based system, were constant themes in the Conservative project to transform the UK educational framework.

Following their defeat in the first 1974 election, many Tory MPs were ready to discard the 'Butskellite' post-war educational policy consensus and develop a distinctive Conservative Education policy (Adler *et al*, 1989). The initial re-orientation of the party's policy was marked by the appointment of Norman St John Stevas as Secretary of State for Education, his launch of the 'Parents' Charter' in 1974 and a Charter of Parents' Rights in their October 1974 Election Manifesto. The latter promised to "impose clear obligations on the State and local authorities to take account of the wishes of parents" and to "consider establishing a local appeal system for parents dissatisfied with the allotment of schools" (Conservative Party, 1974). The political attractiveness of parental choice was complemented by its compatibility with "traditional Conservative values of individual freedom from state control and parent's responsibility for their children" (Tweedie, 1986: 4). Parental choice also accorded with the increasingly prominent New Right view that "the general well-being of society is best served when individuals are allowed to pursue their self-interest" (Ranson, 1990b:10) with government constraining the lives of the country's citizens as little as possible, enabling the maximum extent of freedom of individual choice. Falling school rolls, by increasing the 'slack' in the system, made it easier to translate theory into reality because fewer schools were full.

The New Right believed that market mechanisms were essential if education was to be accountable, parental choice a reality and standards improved. The regulation of the public sector, bringing competition into monopoly areas, and the transfer of power to individuals as 'consumers' were key strands of social policy legislation under Thatcher, these principles also being applied to the reform of the National Health Service, for example, in the late 1980s (Feintuck, 1994). There was extended debate over alternative ways of changing parents into consumers with discussion centring on two methods in particular: pupil-led funding and the educational voucher system. With pupil-led funding, instead of

the LEA deciding on the size of a school's budget, it would be directly linked to the number of children a school could attract. Alternatively, parents could be given vouchers that would enable them to purchase the education of their choice, public or private. The practical and political difficulties with the latter system meant that a combination of pupil-led funding and parental choice of school was seen as a more practical way forward, though vouchers featured in the pilot scheme for universal nursery school provision introduced in 1995. Both schemes were designed to reward schools that were more attractive to parents.

It should be noted that there has been no serious attempt, yet, to create an entirely free market in secondary education. Rather, 'quasi-markets' have been instituted, differentiated from a fully free market by two criteria in particular. First, the competing bodies, schools in this instance, are not attempting to maximise profits. Secondly, consumers purchase educational services not with cash but with a notional voucher (Le Grand, 1991). For even a quasi-market to work efficiently, though, schools had to be able to compete to some extent and parents would need more freedom to choose.

Increased choice of school for parents inevitably meant diminished powers for local authorities. This was precisely the direction in which the Thatcher government wished to travel. Labour-controlled LEAs, particularly those under the control of the 'hard' Left such as Liverpool, Brent and Haringey, were perceived as wasteful in their use of public money. As education represented the greatest expenditure by local authorities, it inevitably featured as a major battleground in any conflict with central government. The Audit Commission (1986, 1) found that LEAs were not, in general, "reorganising their schools to bring capacity into line with school rolls" and the government thought local authorities unlikely

to maximise the savings in the educational budget made possible by falling pupil numbers (Hewton, 1986).

Confrontation over certain councils' refusal to cut expenditure in line with Government demands was escalated when some Labour authorities attempted to amend school curricula in pursuit of policies relating to race, gender and sexual orientation. The so-called 'loony-left' authorities may have had an influence on the debate about the extent of local-authority powers out of all proportion to their numbers, but they helped to form the political climate within which the removal of powers from the LEA and the introduction of the market were both cited as means of reducing the level of public expenditure and improving educational standards (Maclure, 1989).

Educational quality, generally, had emerged as an additional rationale for Conservative policy on parental choice from around the mid-1970s. Parental choice would force unpopular (poor) schools to close and enable popular (good) schools to expand (Adler *et al*, 1989). This policy would appeal to those parents who, the Black Papers claimed, would previously have gone to grammar schools and who were disenchanted with comprehensive schooling, (Adler *et al*, 1989). The relationship between schools as 'producers' of education and parents as 'consumers' would be redefined by giving parents the power to take their custom elsewhere and forcing schools to consider parents' preferences, rather than educational provision being decided by teachers making professional judgements on what was good for pupils (Hirsch, 1994).

Strong pressures were, therefore, building to limit LEA powers. There were many ways in which some sort of educational market could be instituted. Feintuck (1994) argues that the Conservative's determination to achieve it through a single-track approach to parental empowerment, at the expense of the local authority, created a polarisation of the issues of

choice and planning. Disputes over grammar school closures also generated much debate, both locally and nationally. Opening up the secondary school system to the market by increasing the rights of parents can be seen, in this context, as an additional means of dismantling the powers of the local state.

The outpouring of Conservative educational legislation in the 1980s derived, therefore, from a variety of sources. A concern with educational quality was, perhaps, the issue most trumpeted. However, the reality of falling rolls, the politics of the attack on local government and the ideological primacy of the market were also major ingredients in the rationale for the radical restructuring of education initiated by the 1980 Education Act and brought to some sort of fruition by the 1988 Education Reform Act. The detailed provisions of these Acts and other relevant legislation are now outlined.

2.6 The 1980 and 1993 Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Act.

The Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997 enacted a considerable volume of educational legislation. The 1980 and 1993 Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Acts were particularly relevant to parental choice and the introduction of the market into secondary education. The 1980 Act further developed open enrolment and increased the supply of information about schools and transfer procedures to parents. Subsequent legislation, in particular the 1988 Education Reform Act, strengthened these concepts as well as introducing Local Management of Schools (LMS), grant-maintained status and the National Curriculum. All these features are briefly outlined in the contexts of the Acts that introduced them.

2.6.1 The 1980 Education Act.

This first Conservative attempt to introduce a market into secondary education was far from the full-blooded attack on the *status quo* of LEA control of admissions favoured by

the more radical free-marketeers in the government. Within the DES their view was represented by Rhodes Boyson who believed parental choice could establish a free market in education that would lead to higher educational standards. He, however, had to concede to his ministerial colleagues, Baroness Young and Mark Carlisle, who believed LEAs were better able to maintain educational standards than completely unfettered choice (Tweedie, 1986).

Stillman and Maychell (1986) believe three main factors determined the contents of the Act: a belief in the political benefits of promoting parental choice, falling rolls and, finally, the need to deal with the growing number of appeals by parents to central government against allocation of places at secondary school made under Section 68 of the 1944 Education Act. At this stage, parental choice was valued most for its potential to assist in the management of falling rolls (Adler *et al*, 1989). LEAs were still trusted with the management of the contraction of secondary provision but parental choice would show which schools should survive and which schools should close. Despite the strong managerial overtones of the Act, it was claimed that, through its emphasis on the new concept of open enrolment, it would bring about improved parental involvement in choice of secondary school (Stillman & Maychell, 1986).

The relevant legislation on open enrolment was contained in Section 6 of the Act, which stated that LEAs had to establish a system by which all parents could express a preference for the school of their choice.

“Every local education authority shall make arrangements enabling the parent of a child in the area of the authority to express a preference as to the school at which he wishes education to be provided for his child in the exercise of the authority’s functions and to give reasons for his preference” (1980 Education Act).

The main grounds that an LEA could give in refusing a parent's preference were: a pupil's failure to meet a school's legitimate selection criteria, where compliance would clash with the principles of a voluntary aided or special agreement school or "if compliance with the preference would prejudice the provision of efficient use of resources" (Education Act, 1980: 7). The Act permitted selection on the basis of ability, though only for schools which had maintained or re-introduced a selective secondary system before the passage of the legislation.

A more significant limitation on parents' ability to choose was contained in Section 15 of the Act which set out the powers an LEA could use to control of the number of pupils admitted to a school. These powers were most clearly expressed in DES Circular 1/81. Each school was given a 'standard number' of pupils based on 1979/80 admissions, but was allowed to set intended intake limits up to 20% below this number. Beyond these limits "the authority or governors would not make further admissions to the school" (DES, 1981: 9).

The emphasis in choice had fundamentally shifted, as now the LEA had to justify refusal of a preferred school as opposed to the parent having to give a valid reason for requesting a school other than that allocated. Nevertheless, LEAs could legally combine efficiency grounds and their power to set intended limits in refusing such requests. Some LEAs, rather than use these powers to provide the flexibility to manage the efficient contraction of secondary education, reduced numbers in successful schools in order to retain the viability of those that were less popular (Walford, 1990). If parents were unhappy with their allocation of school, then Section 7 of the Act introduced a statutory procedure they could use to appeal against refusal of their preference. The LEA constituted the appeal

committee. For the first time details of appeals procedures had to be published to parents, as part of the information that LEAs were bound to make available to parents.

Statutory publication of secondary school admissions procedures was the 1980 Act's second contribution to the creation of an educational market. Provision of this information allowed parents to act more easily as consumers in differentiating between schools and thus reinforced the introduction of open enrolment. Section 8 of the Act required LEAs to publish annually "the arrangements for the admission of pupils to schools maintained by the authority, other than aided or special agreement schools" (Education Act, 1980: 7). The information to be published included the number of pupils expected to be admitted to each school, the admissions functions of the LEA and governors, the policy followed in deciding admissions and the arrangements for pupils from outside the LEA area. Additionally, the LEA was required to publish information on the authority's arrangements for admission to schools outside their geographical boundary and to schools within the LEA area but not maintained by it.

The historic geographical diversity of LEA secondary transfer procedures has already been referred to. The major research into the consequences of the 1980 Act for parental choice, by Stillman and Maychell (1986), demonstrated that much of this diversity persisted into the 1980s. Furthermore, they found that 76 out of 125 LEAs still followed a formal catchment area policy, whereby one place only at a local school was initially offered, illustrating the failure of the Act to instigate fully open enrolment.

Stillman & Maychell (1986, 182) identified four models of LEA allocation criteria which were common in the early 1980s:

- Optimal choice - where there was more than one school to choose from, free, viable

transport to any school, information provided on procedures operated by the LEA and no LEA or divisional boundary restrictions. Thirty nine percent of LEA responses fitted this category.

- Minimal choice - despite the 1980 Education Act, these LEAs opposed parental choice and their procedures were often designed to try to discourage expression of preferences. These LEAs frequently used strong catchment systems, either to increase the social or academic mix of schools, or as part of a policy to enhance links between schools and the local community
- Hybrid choice - these fell into two categories. Some offered all children a place at the catchment school but also encouraged parents to request an alternative, if they so wished. Others asked parents to name their first choice but reminded them of the identity of their local school and of the benefits of choosing it.
- Geographically restricted choice - mainly rural areas where geographical reality effectively confined choice to a single school

Over-subscription criteria, the rules that LEAs used to decide which children should be admitted to an over-subscribed school, were also characterised by a great degree of variation. They ranged from strict catchment school allocation with no choice to the deciding of over-subscription by lots (later barred by the Department for Education (DfE)). However, each of the following four most common over-subscription criteria were used in 50% or more of LEAs:

- Sibling already attending secondary school
- catchment area residence
- medical factors
- proximity to school

Proximity to school criteria can create a 'quasi-catchment' policy in those LEAs with no formal catchment system so that the persistence of catchment systems is perhaps even stronger than these figures at first suggest. The continuing pre-eminence of the LEA in deciding secondary admissions is further reflected by the finding that only 40% of parents felt they were given a real choice (Stillman and Maychell, 1986, 90).

The 1980 Act was, then, only partially successful in promoting parental choice. Some LEAs developed admissions policies that laid greater stress on parental preference, but Stillman and Maychell's study shows that, for many LEAs, the Act did not fundamentally weaken the catchment system and parental choice continued to be severely constrained. LEAs justified the continuation of formal catchment policies in a number of ways, but the argument that had most appeal to Conservative opinion (and LEAs), at a time of economic depression, was the need for long-term planning to maximise the efficient and effective use of resources. This rationale was, perhaps, the main reason that the Government allowed such variation to occur (Walford, 1990). However, the ideological balance in the government and the Department of Education and Science had decisively shifted by the time of the 1988 Education Reform Act.

2.6.2 1988 Education Reform Act

In the mid-1980s a number of advisory groups to the Conservative Party wished to see the pendulum swing much further from LEAs towards parents. Bodies such as the Adam Smith Institute, the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Hillgate Group believed that problems of educational standards would only be resolved by the subordination of professional's control of school organisation and the curriculum to "unfettered parental control and

choice” (Ranson, 1990b: 22). Such ideas informed the radical new education policy that was a major element of the Conservative manifesto for the 1987 General Election.

The manifesto commitment was translated into a Bill that was introduced to Parliament by Kenneth Baker in the following terms:

“The Bill will galvanise parental involvement in schools. Parents will have more choice. They will have greater variety of schools to choose from. We will create new types of schools. Parents will be far better placed to know what their children are being taught and what they are learning and the Bill will introduce competition into the public provision of education. This competition will introduce a new dynamic into our schools system which will stimulate better standards all round” (DES, 1987).

One of the main thrusts of the Act was the continuation of the transformation from ‘producer power’ (teachers and LEAs) to ‘consumer power’ (parents, employers, the community) begun by the 1980 Education Act. The decentralisation of power to individual schools allowed them to compete for the favours of parents who were provided with new ways to compare school performance. The powers of LEAs to restrict parental choice were significantly reduced. There is a considerable literature evaluating the 1988 Education Reform Act (for example, Flude & Hammer, 1990, Walford, 1994, Wallace, 1992, Fitz *et al*, 1993). This section confines itself to a simple outline of its measures. The practical effects of the Act, insofar as they affect secondary transfer, will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3.

OPEN ENROLMENT

The balance between parents’ right to choose and LEAs’ ability to engage in long-term planning was decisively settled in favour of parents. A clear expression of the greater importance attached to parental choice by the 1988 Act is given in a DES circular issued

after the Act: and entitled 'Admission of Pupils to County and Voluntary Schools': ".....the Secretary of State hopes that admission authorities will give full recognition to the expression of parental preference with immediate effect and will not turn away eligible applicants to their schools unless those schools are physically full" (DES, 1988b: 1). Physical capacity was defined as being the enrolment in each particular age group at the beginning of the 1979/80 school year or the 1989-90 school year whichever was greater. If governing bodies wished to increase school numbers, they could apply to the Secretary of State (Ranson, 1990a). Thus, the LEAs lost their power to reduce school rolls by up to 20 per cent, as well as their right to limit places at most schools for any reason other than exceeding their physical capacity.

Now the only reason for refusal of parental choice (except in the case of denominational and the remaining grammar schools) was that a school was full to capacity. However, the legislation did not specify how LEAs should determine who is admitted to a school for which there is excess demand. The 1980 Education Act required the publication of admissions criteria, but no guidance was given on what form these should take. In particular, no mention was made of the suitability of catchment areas as a way of deciding admissions. The current legal position over admissions procedures is considered in the following section. Given that the 1980 Act arose from a context of concern about surplus school capacity, the lack of consideration given to over-subscribed schools is perhaps understandable. Nevertheless, increased fluidity of pupil movements arising from the Government's legislation, alongside the recent transition from falling to rising rolls, meant that this aspect of parental choice was likely to become increasingly prominent.

LOCAL MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS

A key element in the 1988 Act was LMS. This provides schools with both the motivation and the ability to attempt to maximise their appeal to parents and their children. Bullock and Thomas (1990) view LMS as an overall package of five elements that de-centralises control over resources from LEAs to schools and reduces the powers of professional teachers so that they are more accountable to parents and the local community:

- Open enrolment (outlined above)
- financial delegation
- formula funding
- appointment and dismissal of staff
- assessment of performance.

Financial delegation provided schools with much greater control over their day-to-day budgets. They could now be flexible in whom they chose to award contracts for supply of educational materials and equipment or the carrying out of building maintenance work. This de-centralisation of powers could be considered part of an international trend, both in education and the wider industrial scene (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988) with schools considered better at identifying their resource priorities than LEAs (Thomas, 1987).

A feature linked to financial delegation is formula funding. The 1988 Act required LEAs to prepare a formula for calculating a budget for each maintained school, excluding special schools and nursery schools. DES guidance (1988a) on the production of funding formulae had to be used and each formula had to receive the approval of the Secretary of State (Bullock & Thomas, 1993). Since 1993 LEAs have been obliged to delegate at least 85% of the overall education budget to schools with the remaining maximum 15% used for

activities such as central administration, inspectors/advisers, structural maintenance, educational psychologists, library and museum services. That part of the overall budget delegated to schools is distributed according to a formula based on guidance given by the DES in 1988 and 1991. The main principle behind the formula is that at least 75% (later raised to 80%) of this funding is proportionate to pupil numbers, thus giving schools an incentive to attract and retain pupils. In the initial guidance, the central determinant of the funding formula was “..the number of pupils in each school, weighted for differences in their age (with subject weightings for sixth form provision if the LEA so decides)” (DES, 1988a: para. 104).

Thus, schools were not just financially rewarded for increasing pupil numbers, there was the possibility of receiving greater funding by attracting pupils who stayed on until the sixth form (Bullock and Thomas, 1993). The corollary is that schools failing to attract sufficient numbers of children, particularly bright children, face the danger of a spiral of decline as loss of income necessitates cost-cutting, reducing educational quality and attractiveness to parents.

Another element of LMS is the delegation to school governors of the power to appoint, suspend and dismiss teaching and non-teaching staff (Thomas, 1990). Given that teachers' salaries constitute a high proportion of a school's overall budget, a consequence of this principle is the possibility that if pupil numbers fall, teachers may have to be made redundant or experienced teachers replaced by younger and cheaper staff.

Finally, LMS provided for publication of information about school performance. The 1980 Education Act required LEAs to publish admissions procedures and public examination results. The 1986 Education Act made the publication of school prospectuses (containing examination results) compulsory. The information available to parents was now expanded

by Section 22 of the 1988 Education Reform Act, which allowed the Secretary of State to specify what material schools and LEAs must publish. Publication of a school's achievements in National Curriculum assessments could now be required (Harris, 1993). All this information, together with data on other topics such as truancy rates and school-leaver destinations that later legislation specified, made possible the publication of school league tables. These league tables were intended to be used by parents when deciding on their choice of school. In practice, many researchers have challenged their value in helping parents make such comparisons and this aspect of LMS is discussed further in the next chapter.

LMS is, then, a framework for competition between schools designed to improve standards and the quality of education, at the same time making the education service more accountable, primarily to 'parents-as-clients' (Thomas, 1990).

THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Transferring to central government substantive control of the specification of what children are taught exemplified government distrust of the educational establishment. Given the strong government drive for choice and diversity, the introduction of the national curriculum seems in one sense somewhat anomalous. The Act requires all maintained schools to provide for all pupils, within the years of compulsory schooling, a basic curriculum to be known as the 'national curriculum' (Maclure, 1989). Three core subjects (mathematics, English and science) and seven foundation subjects, which must be taught, were designated. The advantage of the national curriculum in the creation of a market for education is that it provides a standardised product so that parents can readily (in theory) compare performance in different schools. It also makes it easier for children to move

between schools if parents are dissatisfied. At the same time, however, the ability of schools to compete on the content of their curriculum is reduced.

GRANT-MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

If formula funding loosened the LEAs' grip on school funding, the introduction of the new category of 'grant-maintained' schools by the 1988 Education Reform Act threatened to remove it altogether. "No provision in the Act aroused stronger feelings than those on grant-maintained schools" (Maclure, 1989). In brief, the LEA monopoly of 'maintained' schooling was to be broken by central government directly funding a new sector of state schools. Existing LEA-maintained schools could 'opt-out' and become self-managing institutions receiving funds directly from the centre on the same per capita basis as LEA schools. A ballot on opting-out had to be held if two meetings of governors decided to pursue an application. If more than 50 per cent of parents voted, a simple majority would suffice, otherwise a second ballot would be held which would be binding however many voted (Maclure, 1989).

The Government hoped that besides the reduction in LEA power, greater diversity of schools would emerge and parents would be offered greater choice (Walford, 1990). Considerable opposition to the grant-maintained concept swiftly materialised. Partly, this reflected fears that they would lead to the return of selection, although the Act stated that schools must retain their existing educational character when opting out and could not subsequently change it without going through a set procedure that enabled anyone to present objections to the Secretary of State. In practice, grant-maintained status was more likely to be sought to retain the *status quo*, preventing a grammar school, for example, from being converted by a Labour LEA to comprehensive status. More problematic, in the light of the Government's objective of reducing surplus capacity, was the concern that

schools would opt-out to evade closure. Such a situation would present the Secretary of State with a potentially unenviable choice between hindering an LEA's attempt to increase efficiency, and preventing a school becoming grant-maintained.

In practice, the new policy was less successful than the government had hoped. By 1997 just over 1000 state-maintained schools had voted to opt-out (Halpin *et al*, 1997, 60), including about 16% of secondary schools. This was despite the Government's openly acknowledged preferential treatment to grant-maintained schools in the allocation of grants for capital expenditure (Walford, 1990). However, even one school opting out within a local school system might have profound effects on the secondary transfer process, as grant-maintained schools were under no obligation to co-operate with LEA procedures. In addition to the LEA transfer system, parents now faced the possibility of negotiating a different set of application procedures for each grant-maintained school to which they wished to apply.

2.6.3 1993 Education Act

Government concern about the take up of their grant-maintained school policy was a major factor behind the creation of the 1993 Education Act. The first four features of the Act were all designed to increase the number of schools opting out and to reduce the power of LEAs. The most significant innovation was a new Funding Agency for Schools, launched to act as a channel from government to grant-maintained schools. If more than 10 per cent of pupils in an LEA were in grant-maintained schools, responsibility for provision of schooling would be shared between the LEA and the Funding Agency. If more than 75 per cent of pupils opted out, the Agency would take full responsibility for school provision.

The acquisition of grant-maintained status by even one or two schools has the potential severely to disrupt an LEA's ability to manage the local system. The LEA has to inform all

parents about such schools' admissions procedures, but grant-maintained schools do not have to co-operate with the LEA. The admissions process has the potential to become extremely fragmented and confusing for parents. An additional side effect is the increased difficulty faced by educational researchers, as data on pupil movements are no longer available from a single (LEA) source. Research is not only more difficult, the necessity to secure co-operation from many parties for sensitive data may make many studies impossible.

2.6.4 1997 Labour Government plans

The current Labour government was elected after the completion of the empirical research and surveys presented in this thesis. However, the results of this research are of relevance to Labour's own planned educational reforms which are briefly summarised here. The 1997 White Paper 'Excellence in Schools' contains a number of proposals that, to some degree, rein back the previous administration's free-market approach to education. However, the principle of parental choice remains firmly in place.

Grant-maintained schools will retain their independence from the LEA and most will be known as 'Foundation' schools. They will, however, lose any of the financial advantages they previously enjoyed over LEA schools so that there will be even less likelihood of large-scale opting-out. The Labour government has expressed concern over the fairness of secondary school transfer procedures and under the proposed Act LEAs, working with all local schools, will be responsible for setting up local forums to promote co-operative planning and local partnerships in admissions. Should an agreed framework not emerge, then an independent adjudicator will decide on the form transfer procedures will take. Grammar schools will remain unless sufficient local parents vote to end selection. However, the extension of selection to schools that do not already employ it will be ended.

Most importantly, though, the principle that parents should be free to choose any school that is not over-subscribed is unchallenged.

2.7 Secondary school admissions procedures - the current situation

Both supporters and opponents have portrayed Conservative educational legislation as fundamentally altering the way parents choose secondary schools. Before proceeding to consider the impact of this legislation in practice, it is useful to summarise the contemporary legal position concerning secondary school admissions procedures and school transport. Particular attention is paid here to the legal status of the school catchment and the provision of school transport. The volume of educational legislation and associated case law precludes an exhaustive analysis. Harris (1993, 1995) provides a relatively up-to-date guide to the law relating to schools and, specifically, school admissions and a comprehensive account can be found there.

Admissions policy is still decided by LEAs except in the case of grant-maintained schools, where the governors are the admissions authority and must make their own arrangements. These must be similar in nature to “the arrangements operating for local authority schools in the area” and “consistent with the previous character of the school” (DES Circular 11/88). Problems have nonetheless arisen from lack of co-ordination between GM schools and the LEA over admissions procedures. Since the 1993 Education Act, these can be resolved by agreement between the LEA and school or under a scheme introduced by the Secretary of State (Harris, 1995).

The criteria that admissions authorities (LEAs or governors of grant-maintained schools) should use in deciding who to admit when a school is over-subscribed were not specified in any of the Education Acts. Circular 11/88 advised LEAs and governors that they might apply “any reasonable criteria they wish for deciding which pupils should have priority of

admission”. However, until 1993 the only guidance over the reasonableness of specific criteria was provided by limited case-law. These included sibling connections, geographical proximity and religion in relation to denominational schools (Harris, 1993). The lack of government guidance was remedied by the issue of DfE circular 6/93, *Admissions to Maintained Schools*, which contained the first guidelines from government on concrete admissions criteria. These should be “set in unambiguous priority order”. Objective criteria were favoured with the following examples cited: sibling links, distance from home-to-school, catchment areas, feeder primary schools and academic ability (for selective schools). Criteria involving “an element of judgement” such as medical, social or compassionate grounds, travelling time, religious affiliation or a wish for single-sex/co-education were acceptable, if approached with care. However, admissions arrangements would have to make clear how such judgements would be made. The Circular also highlighted unacceptable criteria including: discretion to circumvent published criteria, exclusion of potentially disruptive children, exclusion of pupils with special needs, allocation by lot and length of time on waiting list.

Thus, although parents may no longer be restricted to choice of the local comprehensive, catchment areas remain valid legal entities when used in ranking applications for oversubscribed schools. Catchments can be combined with selection in a two-stage admissions process. In *R. v. Kingston upon Thames Royal Borough Council ex parte Emsden* (1993), an academic selection stage with final allocation decided by proximity was deemed legal. ‘Flexible’ catchment areas were also judged reasonable by the High Court in *R v Bradford Metropolitan Borough ex p Sikander Ali* (1994). The LEA here linked schools to traditional catchment areas that would expand or contract according to the popularity of the school in a particular year. In this case parents in a certain area found themselves without a catchment school and consequently most of the children there were

allocated to under-subscribed schools. The judge found that basing catchments on traditional community links and the 'flexible' system were lawful (Harris, 1995).

Circular 6/93 also confirmed a very significant judgement on geographical admissions criteria. The *Greenwich* case (which reached the House of Lords in 1990) found that an LEA could not favour pupils from their own administrative area over those from another LEA purely on the basis of their residence outside the LEA boundary. Harris (1993) concludes that LEAs must ignore their own boundaries when considering applications despite the consequent complications for the LEA planning function. One point that has never been tested in law is whether parents living outside an LEA could have equal or greater rights to a place at a school than parents who live within that school's catchment boundary but whose home is more distant. It is possible that parents from another LEA would have priority in such a situation. However, it is certainly the case that parents living close to schools across LEA catchment boundaries have priority over parents who live within the LEA boundary but outside the catchment and with homes at a greater distance from the school.

The requirement of the 1988 Act forbidding the restriction of entry to schools whose total of pupils is below the 'standard number' remains in force. The standard number can be increased by the admissions authority "provided the buildings are adequate to accommodate the new number" (DES, 1981: 346) but Circular 11/88 makes it clear that schools are not required to expand physically to meet demand, though the Conservative Government was keen to help popular schools to do so (Harris, 1995). The 1988 Education Reform Act allows the admissions authority (and only the admissions authority) to reduce the standard number for a school only if the physical accommodation is no longer

sufficient. Before a reduction, though, the LEA or governors, as appropriate, and local objectors would require referral of the proposals to the Secretary of State.

Admissions authorities, LEAs or governors of grant-maintained schools and voluntary schools, are required by the 1980 Education Act to establish arrangements for parents to appeal against school allocation. Both LEA and grant-maintained appeals committees consist of three, five or seven members, one of whom is a lay person. LEA committees may not include LEA employees, while grant-maintained committees may include school governors (though not a majority) but not school employees (1993 Education Act).

Transport is a factor in parental choice of secondary school often neglected in the literature. The role it plays, in combination with geography, in the construction of the total extent of choice available to parents merits an examination of the legal position concerning its provision. The key legislation on school transport, though several times amended, is found in the 1944 Education Act, Section 55: “A local education authority shall make such arrangements for the provision of transport and otherwise as they consider necessary or as the Secretary of State may direct for the purpose of facilitating the attendance of persons receiving education”.

Transport provided under this Section must be supplied free of charge, and must take account, amongst other factors, of the age of the child and the nature of the route they might take (ACE, 1994). LEAs may be no less favourable to grant-maintained schools in provision of free transport than they are to schools maintained by the authority (ACE, 1994). Since the 1993 Education Act, LEAs must also consider the wish of parents that their child should attend a school or institution “ in which the religious education provided is that of the religion or denomination to which his parent adheres” (Section 55(3)). Despite this statement, there is still uncertainty as to whether an LEA could be entitled to

refuse to pay for transport to a denominational school for a child if a 'suitable' non-denominational school was closer (Gardiner, 1994, Harris, 1995). If parents send their child to a school in an LEA other than the one in which they live, provided additional travel costs are not incurred by attending the school, then the home LEA will be responsible for that pupil's transport (Harris, 1993).

This does not mean that the LEA is automatically responsible for providing, or paying for, transport for children to attend whichever secondary school they secure a place. The LEA will not normally be required to provide free transport to children who live within the statutory walking distance of the school. As defined in the 1944 Act, this is three miles for children of eight and over (ACE, 1994). Most crucially, in terms of parental choice and movement across catchments, in *R v Essex County Council, ex parte C, 1993*, the Court of Appeal held that parents cannot demand free transport to the school they want for their child irrespective of the distance to that school and of the availability of other suitable schools nearer to the child's home (ACE, 1994). In other words, the local authority does not generally have to pay for free transport if a school the LEA considers suitable is available less than three miles from the child's home and if no such school exists they only have to pay for transport to the nearest suitable school. However, the education authority must provide free transport if it is really needed, so an acute asthmatic, for instance, living close to a school may still be eligible (ACE, 1994).

2.8 Synopsis

This chapter has shown how it was the norm for children to attend the local secondary school (selective or non-selective) within a formal catchment system in England and Wales between 1944 and the early 1980s. However, successive Conservative governments since 1979 have introduced legislation which fundamentally alters the relationship between

LEAs and the schools they manage. This legislation arose from a variety of political and ideological roots. In particular, New Right policies to increase personal freedom and open up the public sector to market forces have combined with the demographic changes that led to falling school rolls to provide a powerful political rationale for the parental choice legislation. The ability of LEAs to manage secondary school systems has been weakened by a number of measures such as Local Management of Schools, grant-maintained status and the national curriculum. Catchment systems have been the traditional way in which local authorities have managed school allocations. Their relevance in the new era of parent power may be questioned.

Chapter 3. Perspectives and issues in the current practice of parental choice

3.1 Introduction.

The many consequences of the Conservative educational legislation, summarised in the preceding chapter, are the subject of a large and expanding literature. In particular, there has been widespread research into the practice of parental choice of secondary school, ranging from major studies such as those by Stillman & Maychell (1986), Adler *et al* (1989), and Gewirtz *et al* (1995) to small surveys of the type undertaken by Thomas and Dennison (1991) and Hunter (1991). Despite the volume of studies, significant questions posed by the liberalisation of parental choice remain unanswered or even unasked. In particular, commentators from Bondi (1988) to Gewirtz *et al* (1995) have noted the paucity of research into the geographical aspects of choice in this country (although studies in New Zealand tended to be more cognisant of spatial influences on school choice, Waslander & Thrupp (1995), in particular). This current study is primarily empirical, a case-study exposition of the extent to which secondary school catchments are becoming more permeable and how this varies spatially and socially. However, underlying social and economic forces are likely to influence parents' decision-making processes; consequently an examination of a variety of relevant social theoretical perspectives helps place parental choice in a wider context. Such perspectives can also enrich the integration of the data and the findings of this and previous research.

The chapter starts, therefore, with a series of brief, broad overviews of a number of theoretical stances, identifying some advantages and some drawbacks of their use as ways of approaching parental choice. This comparison of theoretical approaches is followed by a presentation of the problematic policy issues most relevant to this thesis. Throughout this

thesis, school choice is conceptualised as a layered process, operating in particular ways at different spatial and organisational scales ranging from the family to the LEA (and beyond to the national and global arenas). Consequently, the various issues are considered in sections corresponding to four main levels of spatial aggregation; a structure which also organises and simplifies the discussion. First, the question of individual (or family) choice is considered, emphasising the relative importance of different reasons for choice professed by parents. Secondly, the neighbourhood, or community setting provides a useful basis for the evaluation of the extent to which parents are influenced by their social and spatial context. Next, there is a discussion of the response of schools to their increasingly market-based environment, and of their defensive and aggressive strategies towards maintaining pupil numbers and enhancing quality. Finally, the extent to which secondary school catchments retain their significance is considered in a section about LEAs. This part also examines the importance of LEA procedures in the choice process, as well as the problems of planning in an uncertain environment. From this broad background the main detailed objectives on which this study will focus are identified, as well as some topics that cannot be exhaustively explored in this thesis, but on which it may shed some light. This summary of the specific objectives of this work is followed by a recapitulation of the main themes of the chapter.

3.2 Overview of different theoretical perspectives relevant to parental choice research.

Parental choice of secondary school is a complex and multi-faceted subject, the analysis of which can benefit from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Although this thesis is essentially empirical, it is important to provide some theoretical grounding. Bowe *et al* (1994) trenchantly criticise much previous parental choice research as unreflective and unthinkingly accepting of the government paradigm of parental choice as a vital component of an effective education market. The use of alternative theoretical views provides a more

critically rigorous approach and guards against too superficial or 'blinkered' an examination. There are several other arguments in favour of such an approach to the research. First, contrasting theoretical perspectives provide a sound basis for a critique of previous studies. Insights can be provided into what should be investigated, with different emphases on the particular aspects of parental choice which most merit exploration. Theoretical perspectives can also help in deciding how investigations should be performed. For example, a Marxist approach might suggest looking for entrenched social inequality as revealed by quantitative patterns of variation in the access of different groups to the more popular schools; by contrast, a post-modern perspective might favour qualitative interviews with no attempt at generalising from the local to the universal. Finally, the use of different models of parental choice systems, and the contexts within which they operate, can aid our understanding of the causes which underlie the empirical findings and the implications and consequences which stem from them.

The theories that follow are not in any particular chronological order. Rather, they are presented in a rough sequence that proceeds from the primarily descriptive models of systems, chaos theory and managerialism through the normative world-views of Marxism and the New Right to the more fragmentary pictures provided by humanism and post-modernism. The description of each theory is necessarily brief. The main concern is with what each perspective has brought, or can bring, to the problem and with the identification of its potential and limitations in the context of this research.

3.2.1 Systems/Chaos.

Systems and chaos theory offer an approach to the modelling of educational structures and related social interactions that may be valuable when studying parental choice. For

example, the concept of homeostasis, the way in which natural systems maintain themselves in a changing environment, particularly through feedback loops, may be applicable (Laszlo, 1972). Over-subscription of a popular school in one year may lead to a reduction of applications in the following year. Parents of the next cohort may learn from the failure of their neighbours to secure their choice and may therefore express their preference for a school where their child is more likely to gain a place. Alternatively, positive feedback may lead to the development of 'sink schools', as predicted by Adler *et al* (1989) and many others. This situation could arise as a result of a school losing the more able or affluent pupils elsewhere, leading to the lowering of the school's level of academic attainment. As each year passes, an increasing proportion of local parents of 'brighter' pupils would seek alternative schools with a stronger academic intake, thereby producing an inexorable decline in the performance and attractiveness of the sink school. Clearly, the outcome in such systems is dependent on certain parameters such as the extent to which popular schools can increase their capacities and unpopular ones can be removed from the system.

Chaos theory (e.g. Gleick, 1987; Gregerson & Sailer, 1993; Radjicki, 1990) also offers some useful insights for this research. The classic illustrative example hypothesises the beat of a butterfly's wings initiating a sequence of events leading to a hurricane thousands of miles away. An analogy in the area of parental choice is the effect of a single act of bullying in a school. If this is heavily publicised in the local press and through the community 'grapevine', some local parents may change their preference to neighbouring schools, thus displacing parents who would otherwise have secured a place for their child at those schools. In this way, 'ripple' effects may spread throughout the system.

Chaos theory has demonstrated the existence in nature of apparently stable systems that, following change in the environmental conditions, rapidly transform into a different but equally stable configuration (Loye and Eisler, 1987). If such conditions exist in socio-economic environments (and Gregerson and Sailer (1993) amongst others believe they do), then pupil flows in a secondary school system may be an example. The removal of constraints on parental choice could be a development that leads to a change from one 'stable state' to another. Alternatively, it could be argued that the dynamics of government policies, macro-economic forces and other factors might over-ride the achievement of such a 'stable' model: change may be endemic and continuous.

While systems theory suggests the possibility of predictive modelling, chaos theory cautions against it. Even with a very few simple rules governing parents' choices, small changes in initial conditions may produce grossly different outcomes. In that case, it may be more useful to use qualitative research methods to get a 'feel' for parents' current views, whilst using existing empirical data to identify previous patterns of pupil movements between catchments as a means of exploring the variety of possible futures that may yet arise. Modelling may not be able to make precise predictions, but it can be a very useful heuristic device, as many of its proponents, such as Thomas (1987), maintain. Predictive modelling is not an aim of this thesis, but the results may give an insight into how valid such an approach might be.

3.2.2 Managerialism.

Managerialist models of social systems focus on the powers of officials (or 'gate-keepers') in enabling access to institutions and in controlling the procedures that must be negotiated by the clients of a service. Management of parental choice procedures has traditionally been the domain of LEA officials in conjunction with professional teachers in primary and

secondary schools. Government legislation has been aimed at undermining their dominance and transferring power to the parent as 'consumer'. Therefore, the success of parental choice policies, in the government view, will be judged partly by the degree to which parents freely express and achieve their preference for a particular school, unhindered by any bureaucratic obstacles such as complex forms or drawn-out appeals procedures.

A decline in the influence of the LEA may, however, be accompanied by the rise in importance of managerialist practices in the schools themselves. Gewirtz *et al* (1995) observed a 'technical rationality' concerned with objectives, financial controls and provision of information, displacing a 'substantive rationality' of education, teaching and learning. This is a visible outcome of a strengthened managerialism within schools. Less transparent may be an expanding role for Heads and governors as the 'new gatekeepers' to popular schools as overt or covert selection become more common.

There is a mushrooming literature advising schools on how to manage and sell themselves to maximum effect in the 'new marketplace' (Webster *et al*, 1993; Evans, 1995 for example). A number of studies (e.g. Woods, 1992 and West, 1992) examine parental choice from a managerialist perspective, seeking to identify how schools and parents are reacting to the new market environment and how schools can best respond.

The managerialist perspective can be criticised, however, for over-rating the importance of local officials or Heads when they are effectively 'puppets' whose strings are pulled by more substantial actors, such as national government policy makers. It can be argued that LEAs and schools are, at most, partners with parents in a transaction that is effectively dictated by powerful structural forces beyond the control of either of them. Nevertheless, research into changing patterns of choice should pay heed to the role of LEA officials and

school Heads and senior staff as gatekeepers who may make access to particular schools more or less difficult for different groups of parents.

3.2.3 New Right

The New Right certainly saw the managerialist practices of Labour-controlled LEAs as a major obstacle to educational reform. Parental choice is generally portrayed as a New Right project that stresses the parent as consumer and education as a marketplace (e.g. Chubb and Moe, 1990). Its roots in this ideology were covered in the previous chapter and will not be rehearsed again here. It is sufficient to summarise the purposes of parental choice for the New Right in the following three ways:

- A market system, by closing unpopular and rewarding popular schools, should simultaneously increase financial efficiency and educational quality
- All parents should have the right to choose the most suitable education for their children
- Better choice and flexibility in education will better serve a pluralistic democracy

(Hillgate Group quoted in White (1988)).

One of the most fundamental criticisms of the underlying philosophy of parental choice, as advocated by the New Right, is that the market is not truly free. Some parents may be disadvantaged because of their socio-economic status, location, access to transport or other factors. Any significant limitations in the workings of the market that are revealed in this present research will be identified. Issues such as the extent to which parental wishes are satisfied, and the differential effects of choice on schools of varying popularity, are certainly questions that can be addressed by this thesis. Issues of educational quality and

diversity are considerably more problematic, but their importance as policy objectives needs to be kept in mind.

3.2.4 Marxism.

Marxists see the market as inherently inequitable, favouring the more powerful segments of society at the expense of the disadvantaged. Underlying class-based economic structures are much more likely to dictate the outcomes of new educational policy than the aggregation of 'free and rational' individual choices. Most Marxist educational researchers have been concerned with social reproduction within schools rather than largely external processes such as transfer procedures.

More relevant Marxist academic contributions to the parental choice policy debate are to be found in the geographical literature, particularly in the writings of David Harvey. In his analysis of competition for access to urban services such as housing and education, notably in 'Social Justice and the City' (1973) Harvey places a strong emphasis on the importance of urban spatial differentiation in the reproduction of social advantage. Unfettered capitalism will inevitably discriminate against the under-privileged, and this is as true of education as of any other goods. Parents in middle-class areas are likely to use a decentralised education system to retain the advantages their schools have over those in the inner city. Such factors are clearly of relevance when considering parental choice. Parents do not make decisions in a vacuum and their decisions ought to be examined against the background of their social, economic and spatial context.

A Marxist approach is likely to highlight socio-economic variations in the extent to which parents make use of their strengthened right to choose. However, Harvey (1973) questions the utility of 'just mapping' social injustice - all that will be revealed is predictable middle-class advantage. This study may be defended against such a charge because the operation of

liberalised parental choice may be producing new educational structures and spaces. An understanding of their novel character would inform a continuing insight into the way that social advantage is reproduced.

Although there is very little explicitly Marxist literature focused on parental choice, the policy debate is strongly informed by concerns over social equity. Middle-class parents are commonly described as advantaged in securing the best outcome for their children because of their greater financial and cultural capital (see Adler *et al*, 1989; Bradford, 1991; Ball, 1993). The concept of cultural capital is central to the research of Ball and his colleagues. A 'good' education can be at least as important in succeeding in life as financial capital. Parents who have been educationally advantaged will use the cultural resources they have gained to secure a similar advantage for their children. The writings of Pierre Bourdieu (1990, for example) are particularly influential in this respect.

Marxists may be criticised for their excessively dismissive view of the importance of human agency. Most Marxists would see little relevance in personal interviews of parents about their choice-making processes, apart from the provision of any insights they may provide into how they are (consciously or unconsciously) affected by underlying socio-economic structure. Yet it would be dangerous to assume that individuals cannot make a difference. Alternative, more human agency-centred theories are now examined.

3.2.5 Humanism.

Humanist or behavioural perspectives put individuals first. Economic and social structures are the aggregate of the mass of individual decision-making processes. These decisions are not made by automata but are deliberate responses by intelligent actors. Goldthorpe (1996), for instance, has used the concept of 'Rational Action Theory' to explain the persistence of a substantial differential in educational achievement between the middle and working class

since the war. He theorises that parents and children from deprived backgrounds gain fewer educational benefits than those from more affluent backgrounds for the same investment of time and money. The failure of liberal education policy to reduce educational differentials may, therefore, be explained by the aggregation of rational actions of parents rather than the 'middle-class conspiracy' implied by Bourdieu's work.

If the whole is, primarily, the sum of its parts, then, in order to understand the causes of varying patterns of pupil flows across catchment boundaries, the decision-making processes that create these flows must be understood. This means talking to parents, and not just by giving them a series of standard questions that makes assumptions about what is important in the process (e.g. Hunter, 1991; Bastow, 1991) but by allowing them to reveal their own perceptions of what is meaningful to them, in all its complexity. Surveys adopting this more qualitative approach, such as Hughes *et al* (1994) and Gewirtz *et al* (1995), are less common than the more quantitative studies but have provided some valuable insights into choice-making processes.

The strength of the humanist approach may also, however, be perceived as its weaknesses. By emphasising the individuality of each person and decision, the scope for generalisation is reduced. This may be inevitable if, as Olsson (1980) claims, social science's language of certainty cannot cope with the more ambiguous language of human action. The utility of purely humanist or behaviourist perspectives is further diminished by their denial of the significance of socio-economic structures in decision-making. "In centring agency, sociology could end up with a formulation that leaves injustice out" (Reay, 1996: 592).

Furthermore, there are methodological problems in the naïve use of a qualitative approach. People may lie, they may rationalise, and they may be unaware of the real roots of their decision. For example, ethnicity is rarely a factor mentioned by parents when asked what

influences their choice of secondary school. Despite this reticence, ethnographic research (e.g. Deem *et al*, 94; Gewirtz *et al*, 1995) reveals that parents, teachers and Heads are all well aware of the importance of this consideration in determining the intake of some schools. To evaluate parents' motivation when considering a choice of school purely on the basis of their own accounts would be unwise. The reverse, though, is surely true. To make assumptions about the causes of social patterns purely on the basis of quantitative analyses of people's behaviour without talking to those whose actions underlie such patterns is foolish as well as arrogant. Perhaps what is important is contextual validity. Cloke *et al* (1989) see the greatest contribution of humanist geography as its emphasis on the everyday importance of sense of place for social settings such as work and school. It is about social meaning, in contrast to Marxist geography's focus on social inequality.

3.2.6 Realism/Structuration.

Realist and structuration theory synthesises human agency and socio-economic structures. Reproducing the full complexity of this approach (as well as the other theories covered in this chapter) is well beyond the scope of this thesis. In broad terms, however, realism and structuration hold that people can change the structures within which they operate and by which they are influenced. Gregerson (1986: 185) writes, "while temporal and spatial organisation limit individual actions, they are at the same time, the creation of history, society and individual action". It is the interaction between structure and human agency that should be the focus of research. Structuration theory's greatest contribution to research may be the way it warns against too great a tendency to either of the extremes of an overly structure-based or human-agency orientated approach (Cloke *et al*, 1991).

Realists (e.g. Bhaksar) see different structures, processes and mechanisms revealed at different levels of reality, with open links between these different levels. An example in

educational research is Ball's (1993) view of educational policy-making operating in such a complex and haphazard way that 'spaces' exist for micro-level 're-writing' of policy. Both levels require investigation. "Concrete research invariably has to mobilise and integrate concepts from several theories in order to capture the many-sided nature of its object, even where it is a limited problem such as migration flows" (Sayer, 1984: 223). Realism is a potentially fruitful approach to parental choice research, with the psychology of individual decision-making, managerialist processes within the LEA and the systems behaviour of high-level pupil flows between catchments all worthy of study and all potentially influencing each other.

Sayer (1984) also remarks on the way in which causal powers depend upon the presence or absence of certain "contingently related conditions". The purpose of research is to establish the contingent conditions under which causal mechanisms (class, gender, etc.) are triggered. The difference that space makes forms part of the set of contingent conditions (Sayer, 1984) and this aspect of the parental choice process has certainly been insufficiently researched. Indeed, as Bowe *et al* (1994) assert, most parental choice research has been naive in the extent to which it has focused on one aspect of the problem and ignored important empirical and theoretical aspects of the whole.

Realist and structuration theories favour a pluralist methodological approach whereby research technique is dictated by the nature of the topic under investigation. Extensive and intensive research methods are necessary for a complete understanding of problems. In other words, it is important to have a (mainly quantitative) overall picture of what is happening as well as (mainly qualitative) knowledge of the many facets of reality that may be relevant to a particular outcome. Such an approach can be very demanding and may be criticised on the grounds that few have the resources to unravel a problem of any

complexity and produce useful results. Nevertheless, as an approach to a problem like parental choice, it has much to recommend it, at least as an ideal to be aimed for.

3.2.7 Postmodernism and Post-Fordism

While realism may posit different types of meaning at different levels of reality, it holds that these meanings are capable of linkage in one explanatory whole. Many postmodern theorists reject this possibility. Lyotard (1984: xxiv) wrote, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards meta-narratives”. Over-arching systems such as Marxism are rejected together with the conception that it is possible to synthesise generalised theses from local evidence. The emphasis instead is on difference - gender, race, class, location, for instance. Foucault (1977) urges the reader to de-construct dominant discourses, to re-evaluate the conventional way in which we view the world. In this context, parental choice can be seen as part of a new system of diversity and local meanings. Its significance for one group of people cannot be automatically attributed to a similar group in another spatial or social context. Particular attributions of meaning to processes, such as parental choice, should not be taken at face value, especially those of the state. Qualitative research that examines these differences is appropriate, but quantitative research is perceived as of little use. Postmodernism has only recently made a significant impact on educational research (see Paechter and Weiner, 1996). Bowe *et al* (1994) use postmodern concepts, without accepting their general validity, but such ideas are absent, in methodological terms, from other parental choice studies.

There is another view of postmodernism (advocated by Harvey (1989) amongst others) as not so much a distinct contrast with modernism as merely a novel form of capitalism. He recognises the rise of “postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of a more flexible mode of capital accumulation, and a new round of ‘space-time compression’ in the

organisation of capitalism” (Harvey, 1989: vii) but these are just changes in the surface appearance of capitalism. Certainly, if education is viewed as a ‘product’ in the marketplace, then the ironic, playful, self-referential nature typical of postmodern consumption appears absent. Nevertheless, Halpin *et al* (1997) see the traditionalist response of schools to parental choice (uniforms, discipline, ritual) through a postmodernist perspective (Dale, 1997). There is also some evidence, though, of the differentiation of niche-markets in education, as exemplified by the introduction of City Technology Colleges, but this is probably more a response to the global market’s need for new skills than the creation of novel local meanings – more post-Fordism than postmodernism.

A post-Fordist economy, the development of more flexible modes of accumulation and workforces accompanied by substantial de-regulation, might be expected to be associated with appropriate changes in the educational system (Bradford, 1995). Presumably, such an education system would operate on similarly diverse and flexible lines. However, globalisation is also leading to increased uniformity with a concern for those national educational standards that allow international comparisons. The pressure for educational uniformity is exemplified by the introduction of the National Curriculum and associated testing. There is a clear policy tension here. Parental choice research can provide clues about the extent to which a ‘post-Fordist’ system of secondary transfer is arising, whereby schools are becoming less homogenous as they develop distinctive educational style and content that reflects and serves the increasingly diverse post-Fordist economy outside. This study is sensitive to the possibility of an increased differentiation of education and the creation of ‘niche’ markets but cannot attempt a substantial analysis of this topic.

In summary, postmodern theory alerts us to the danger of assuming too great a coherence connecting, say, parental choice practice in different parts of the country or city. On the other hand, policies such as that of the national curriculum show that the government, at least, still sees education as a national enterprise. And Marxists would certainly see global and national economic structures, rather than local differences, as pre-eminent.

3.2.8 Eclecticism.

The eclectic approach uses specific theoretical perspectives according to their merits in dealing with particular aspects of a problem. It can be criticised on the grounds that linking and building explanations out of incompatible theories is dangerous. However, if one accepts the realist ontology whereby different structures, processes and mechanisms are revealed at different levels of reality, and the author does, then there is no inconsistency. In describing the multi-faceted nature of parental choice, Bowe *et al* (1995: 76) use the metaphor of a 'landscape of choice'. The thought and decision making behind completion of a school transfer form enters "into a productive relationship with the 'environment' and matters of geographical, economic and social circumstance intermingle with information about education values and politics". The geographical element of this landscape is the core of this thesis but the relationship of spatial aspects of choice with all the other factors is fully acknowledged. Some of these linkages are made in the following discussion of issues in secondary school choice.

In conclusion, all the theoretical approaches that have been so briefly discussed here have something to offer this research. As the study is primarily empirical and existing research on the topic is sparse, then an eclectic approach will best guard against failure to appreciate an important aspect of the school choice process. However, this thesis will be most strongly informed by the realist perspective, recognising the importance of the

agency/structure interaction and, crucially, the belief that examination of school choice at different social and spatial scales will reveal different (but linked) structures, processes and mechanisms.

3.3 Issues in parental decision-making and government policy.

This section examines the main issues relevant to the current practice of parental choice as explored in this thesis. The existing research is outlined and certain gaps highlighted. Some of the issues referred to in this section are outside the scope of this study on resource grounds alone. However, all are relevant to at least some parents' decisions and need to be considered so that the practical outcomes of the sum of parents' choices can, as far as possible, be placed in the context of the wider socio-economic environment.

Some themes that run through this discussion are worth highlighting. Previous research into parental choice has identified the importance of spatial factors, but there has been little in-depth investigation of their influence on decision-making processes (Higgs *et al*, 1997b). This reflects, perhaps, the context of most of the research in educational sociology, which has shown a limited interest in geographical aspects of education in general. Much of the initial research into school choice has been overly reductionist in the way it seeks to explain choice patterns by investigating one aspect of the problem whilst ignoring the larger picture. Studies such as those of Coldron and Bolton (1990) were often primarily concerned with production of ranked lists of reasons for school choice. Such an approach has been criticised as sociologically naive for accepting at face value the portrayal of parents as rational consumers making choices on the basis of simple criteria (Bowe *et al*, 1994). Research such as that of Adler *et al* (1989) and Echols *et al* (1990) in Scotland and Woods (1992) is more sophisticated, pointing to relationships between choice making and class, but it is too often descriptive and speculative. These studies were insufficiently

grounded in comprehensive research data that could explain the underlying causes of middle-class advantage (Bowe *et al*, 1994). As the previous section discussing theoretical perspectives demonstrated, variation in patterns of school choice is capable of explanation in a variety of different ways, from parents' class position to the realities of urban spatial organisation. Parental choice is a complex process that requires a holistic approach that pays regard both to local particularity and wider socio-economic forces (Gewirtz *et al*, 1995).

Furthermore, as discussed in the section on Realism above, different facets of the educational market place may emerge according to the geographical or social scale at which it is investigated. Therefore, the various issues will now be considered in four different contexts: individual choice, community/neighbourhood factors, the school influence, and LEA procedures and practices.

3.3.1 Individual choice.

Who chooses the secondary school and how 'rational' is that choice?

When seeking to identify how different groups of parents choose a school for their child, the most obvious method is to ask the parents themselves and this has been the approach of many researchers (e.g. West and Varlaam, 1991, Hunter, 1989, Bastow, 1991). However, before proceeding to a discussion of their findings, it is worth considering two questions. Who really makes the decision and how can you know what they are telling you is the truth?

Thomas and Dennison (1991) questioned the whole notion of *parental* choice in a much-cited paper. They found that 60% of pupils in the final year of a junior school themselves made the choice of school, with only 10% having no say in where they went. However, the sample was very biased, as the survey school was located in a predominantly working class

inner-city catchment. Other research (e.g. Coldron and Boulton, 1991; Bastow, 1991; Gewirtz *et al*, 1995; David *et al*, 1994) has found considerable variation in the processes of choice, with working class families giving greater consideration to their children's views than their middle-class counterparts. Gorard (1996) proposes a model whereby parents initially decide on the type of school that is acceptable to their child and then offer them a choice within that category. It is perhaps best to accept Jowett's (1995) finding that choice of secondary school is normally a joint decision between parents and children, with the individual contributions to that choice variable and almost impossible to quantify. Therefore, in this study, 'parental choice' may be considered a synonym for 'family choice'.

Thomas and Dennison's findings should, if nothing else, sensitise researchers to the complexities of the decision-making process. "No single or straightforward explanation of choice emerged. Instead a complex, inter-related mix of factors, which varied with individual perceptions and circumstances, emerged" (Thomas and Dennison, 1991: 245). The difficulty in unravelling this complexity is one reason why the simple ranked lists of factors in choice that many parents are prompted for should be treated with caution.

There are other grounds for pausing before taking parents' proffered reasons for choice at face value. Some researchers have found contradictions between what parents say and what they do. For example, Stillman and Maychell (1986) found that only 17% of geographically isolated parents, with only one practical choice of school, stated that access and/or travel was an important factor in choice, compared with a figure of 52% for a school's academic record. West and Varlaam (1991) found similar evidence of rationalisation of choice. Bradford (1991) suggests that 'product' choice criteria (examination results, for instance) may be more socially acceptable than 'process' factors (friends, distance from school).

Such rationalisation may not be deliberate or conscious: attitudes to class and race are deeply ingrained (Gewirtz *et al*, 1995). Parents may take as 'given' the importance of a factor such as travel-time: something over which they have no control and therefore not part of the conscious decision-making process.

Parents' responses in many of these surveys should be treated with caution, then, as they may not have made the decision, they have to simplify a complex decision-making process, they may rationalise a choice that was forced on them, and they may be (consciously or unconsciously) concealing socially unacceptable motives. Despite these reservations, it is obviously well worth examining the results of the research into parents' school choices. Even when rationalisation of motives is involved, the way this is done may reveal facets of the social pressures that influence the decision-making process. The value of such findings is considerably greater, though, when contextualised by evidence of what parents actually did (Glatter *et al*, 1997).

What school qualities most influence parents when they choose a school?

When considering whether to choose a school for a child, the relative importance of 'product' and 'process' criteria for parents, the comparative importance of academic outcomes and the child's happiness, are likely to be highly influential when it comes to deciding between the local catchment school and less convenient alternatives. The many studies into the criteria that are most important in choice of secondary school have produced markedly varied results. In two studies where parents listed important reasons for choice unprompted, examination results were cited by 52.1% of parents in one instance (Stillman and Maychell, 1986) and by 38.8% in another (Hunter, 1989). By contrast, a similar study by West and Varlaam (1991), interviewing parents of children who had just entered secondary school, found the most frequently cited factor to be 'child wants to go'

which was not mentioned at all by Hunter and by only 8.2% of Stillman and Maychell's sample. The variation is even more marked when research that involved parents being given a pre-set list of factors in choice is considered. This variation can be attributed to a number of causes including the different way questions were framed, the use of prompted and unprompted responses, sample size, biases in the samples, differences in the timing of the studies and geographical variations. Differences in the way middle and working class parents choose schools has been identified by several researchers (e.g. Woods (1996), Reay and Ball (1997)). Woods' research found that middle-class parents were most likely to cite standard of academic education as a reason for choosing a school, whereas working class parents most frequently mentioned the child's own preference.

However, the various studies do tend to produce a broadly similar set of criteria considered important by at least some parents, whether they are presented with a pre-determined list of factors or give their own reasons, unprompted. The factors most frequently found by different researchers to be important for parents are summarised in Table 3.1.

The most striking finding to emerge from these studies is the far greater emphasis placed by parents on 'process' factors compared with 'product' factors. The most important three reasons parents gave for choosing a school in Petch's study (1986) were the child's happiness, the child's preference for the school and the level of discipline at the school. Similarly, Coldron and Boulton (1991) found that parents had the physical and mental security of their child very much in mind when choosing a school. If the nearest school did not appear safe, attractive and caring, then parents were likely to look elsewhere. The importance of a school's 'pleasantness' to parents (David *et al*, 1994) seems clear, and though this may seem a simple and apparently anodyne concept, it may help understanding

of school choice processes by suggesting a focus on what makes a school appear ‘unpleasant’.

Factor	Researchers									
	E	M	S	S&M	P	KEA	H	W&V	W	J
School accessible and safe journey		*	*	*	*		*	*	*	
Discipline and reputation for good discipline		*	*	*		*	*	*		*
Children wanted to go to school	*	*	*	*				*	*	*
Wide choice of subjects	*	*		*			*	*		
The nearest school	*	*		*			*	*	*	*
Good examination results			*	*		*	*	*	*	
Good and caring teachers	*					*	*	*	*	*
School is well managed/good Head	*		*				*	*	*	*
Denominational		*		*			*	*		
Good facilities			*	*		*			*	*
Siblings and relations attend school		*	*		*				*	*

Table 3.1 - Most important factors in school choice (updated from Bastow 1991)

The authors’ details are listed below:

E = Elliot (1982, 40)

M = Mortimore (1984, 49)

S = Steward (1985, 4)

S&M = Stillman and Maychell (1986, 198-202)

P = Petch (1986, 34)

KEA = Kent Education Authority (1988, 7)

H = Hunter (1989, 10)

W&V = West and Varlaam (1991, 9)

W = Webster *et al* (1993, 18)

J = Jowett (1995, 37-39)

How important in the choice process are parents' perceptions of the children at prospective schools?

A major influence on the degree to which parents regard a school as 'pleasant' is the perceived character of the existing intake of pupils. Negatively, bullying and mixing with children from other social or ethnic groups can reduce the likelihood of parents choosing the local school. Motives can vary according to social background. Middle-class parents may see working class children as 'rough elements' who are likely to degrade their own child's learning, while working class parents "confront the spectre of what their child may become" (Reay and Ball, 1997: 94). Conversely, friends and siblings frequently appear as significant factors in the choice process and primary school and neighbourhood links mean that they are most likely to go to the local school. Three quarters of pupils in a study by West & Varlaam (1991) in an outer London borough stated that friends or neighbours were going to their first choice school. In Jowett's survey 76% of parents thought it important that siblings attend the same school and 62% thought it important that friends do too.

Choice patterns may also be influenced by other perceptions of 'difference' such as gender, simple racism or a desire to provide cultural continuity between home and school (Gewirtz *et al*, 1995; Deem, 1984). After initial neglect by academics of a potentially fruitful area of research, evidence of the potential importance of ethnicity as factor in the education market has begun to emerge (Tomlinson, 1997). Similarly, David (1997) attempts to correct a perceived failure to address the role of gender in school choice by highlighting evidence for

the pre-eminence of mothers in the choice process and the increasing importance of gender differentials in examination success to parents when they consider single-sex education. The scarcity of gender-focused parental choice studies may, at least in part, be a consequence of the failure of early choice research to identify gender as a significant factor in parental decision making (Stillman and Maychell, 1986; Bastow, 1991). However, the extent to which gender is a significant factor in choice may reflect the degree to which it can practically be expressed. Single-sex (or denominational) schooling obviously tends to be more prominent as a choice factor when schools of that type are actually accessible, and its availability may also lead to more children of a particular gender going outside the local catchment. Jowett (1995) found 13% of parents of sons favouring a single-sex placement with 22% in favour for a daughter. The figures were approximately reversed when considering strong disagreement with single-sex schooling. The evidence on the role of gender in parental choice patterns is, however, patchy. This is another issue that should be examined in the context of local circumstances.

What information sources are important in the exercise of parental choice?

For parents to make informed choices they must first be able to assess the relative strengths of accessible schools in those aspects they consider important. The formal and informal sources of information used by parents may be crucial in dictating the changing flows of pupils from year to year. Adler *et al* (1989) associated increased provision of information by schools and LEAs with more extensive choice-making. Stillman and Maychell (1986) identified the LEA transfer booklet, school brochures, pre-choice school visits and secondary talks in primary schools as the most important sources of information for parents. More recent research (Jowett, 1995) produced similar findings. Interestingly,

despite their strong promotion by the Conservative government, parents rarely cited school examination league tables as strong influences on choice.

If such 'objective' criteria as league tables of examination results or OFSTED reports are not as serious influences on parents as more nebulous factors such as 'school reputation' (Bastow, 1991), then the community 'grapevine' may play a vital role in a school's success. This might produce less stable pupil flows when one or two isolated pieces of bad publicity lodge in the community subconscious, with damaging results for a school's local standing. Alternatively, the length of time such bad publicity persists in people's memory may slow change in the system, with schools' lost reputations taking considerable times to recover, whatever their objective performance might be. These issues cannot be fully addressed in this thesis but, again, it is important to bear them in mind when examining variations in the permeability of particular catchments and when considering which sources of information are most important for parents choosing a school outside the local catchment.

Furthermore, while recent studies (e.g. Jowett, 1995) may confirm the continuing relative insignificance of school league tables for parents, it cannot be assumed that this will remain the case. If parents become more 'sophisticated' in their new role of 'consumer', then this kind of information may assume a new importance. The current Labour government is planning to answer criticism that league tables do little more than reflect the social characteristics of the pupil intake (Goldstein and Thomas, 1996, for instance) by introducing measures that identify the 'value-added' to pupils' performance at a school. If league tables do become genuinely useful in differentiating between schools, then they may compensate for the relatively poor ability that Gewirtz *et al* (1995) identified in working class parents to establish which schools are most academically effective. However, for

many parents maximising academic performance may not be the most important consideration in school choice. In which case, the community 'grapevine' may continue to play a vital role in school's ability to attract pupils.

How important are spatial and transport factors for parents in choice of school?

We consider, now, factors in choice central to this thesis, namely the importance for parents of relative location of home and school and the method of travel between them. Although school proximity has always been identified as a key factor in school choice, the link between location and choice has generally been neglected by educational researchers (Higgs *et al*, 1997b).

Relative location may be less important for secondary than for primary school pupils (MVA, 1989), but many studies (Thomas & Dennison, 1991; Adler *et al*, 1989; Coldron and Boulton, 1991; Lawton, 1992; Jowett, 1995; Gewirtz *et al*, 1995) have found that for many parents the local school is likely to be chosen if it satisfies their basic requirements for a secure environment and acceptable academic standards. Their decision-making process corresponds to the 'satisficing' model, whereby parents seek the most convenient school which satisfies various defined standards rather than trying to find an alternative that maximises particular predefined goals (Adler *et al*, 1989). If for most parents the local school is likely to be chosen unless there are good reasons to do otherwise, then perhaps more attention should be paid to the motivation underlying rejection of schools rather than parents' positive reasons for selecting them.

Adler *et al* (1989) identified distance as the most significant predictor of choice of school, but there has been little consideration of the importance of catchment boundaries in parental choices. For instance, it may be that there are significant differences in the likelihood of parents close to catchment boundaries attending out-of-catchment schools

compared with those more centrally located. This thesis seeks to investigate this and other spatial issues in the choice process. For instance, spatial variation will also affect the extent and character of parental choice. The isolation of rural schools is the most obvious example. Adler *et al* (1989) found only 2-3% of parents choosing an out-of-catchment school in rural areas compared with 25% in some urban areas. Even advocates of choice such as Sexton in a Black Paper (1977) concede that while urban schools should display diversity, rural schools must unavoidably remain all-embracing comprehensives. The lack of choice is defended on the grounds that at least rural parents are no worse off than before (Flew, 1987). Even in rural areas, however, provision of school transport may create some scope for alternative choices, especially for those dissatisfied with the local school.

Transport is not only relevant to the availability of choice in rural areas but may be crucial in urban areas as well, particularly outside city centres. This is an under-researched topic, even though the limitations of private and public transport have been identified as a key aspect of decision-making (Gewirtz *et al*, 1995). The importance of this factor for families of limited means is accentuated by the remote likelihood of an LEA helping parents with transport costs within the 3 mile limit when such subsidies are discretionary (Mayet, 1997). Indeed, Le Grand (1991) suggests that transport vouchers would greatly aid the efficiency of an education 'quasi-market', though there would still be costs in time and inconvenience. Paradoxically, Conservative pro-market policies in favour of the deregulation of public transport may have contributed to inefficiency in the education market. Certainly, much less has been done in Britain to improve public access to transport as a means of choice than in many other countries (Hirsch, 1995).

Transport to school is not a primary focus of this study, but some regard must be paid to its influence in creating the scope of choice that is available to an individual parent. The

importance of the availability of transport to facilitate choice may vary geographically and amongst different social groups. There is evidence that working class parents place much more value on the availability of a good local school (Reay and Ball, 1997). Such socio-economic variation in school choice is now examined.

Is there socio-economic variation in the ways parents make their choice?

The New Right's portrayal of parents as rational consumers deciding between a range of schools on the basis of various performance indicators has been revealed to be highly unrealistic by many researchers (Gewirtz *et al*, 1995, in particular). There is, moreover, evidence of considerable socio-economic variation in the importance of academic considerations, as well as other factors, in choice of secondary school. Such variation is considered here.

Only Bastow (1991, 269) has carried out a major quantitative study which comprehensively examines socio-economic variation in the relative importance of factors in choice. Parents were divided, on the basis of occupational and educational criteria, into three categories. The study revealed that overall 56% of parents exercised their right to choose a school other than the most local. However, parents from the 'high status' social group were around three times more likely to choose a distant school than those families in the 'low status' group and 31% of the lower group were unsuccessful in securing their choice compared with 12% of the higher group. The reasons given by parents for preferring local or non-local schools also varied according to social status. The high status social group, for instance, ranked academic success significantly higher than the low status group. Some caution, however, is required in interpreting these results. Parents in the high status group rate the reasons 'school recommended by other parents' and 'child will be happy at school' significantly higher than the low-status group. The latter group, on the other hand, rated

‘school’s good reputation’ and ‘child wants to attend school’ more highly. However, these pairs of factors seem closely related, and the likelihood that different social groups may be using different languages of choice (suggested by Bowe *et al* 1994) may limit the value of such discriminatory analysis.

Nevertheless, the more qualitative, though equally extensive, research of Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (particularly Gewirtz *et al*, 1995) confirms important social differences in the selection by parents of their first choice school. They present a model of three types of parent. ‘Privileged/skilled’ choosers, overwhelmingly middle-class, are comfortable participants in the parental choice system, confidently seeking and manipulating their preferred outcome for their child. ‘Semi-skilled’ choosers, with a very mixed class profile, are equally clear about what they want for their children, but not so sure about how to achieve it. They participate actively in the choice process, but may, for example, be unclear about what they are really looking for at an open day. These two groups see distance, travel and safety as contingent, rather than priority or determinate factors to be used to cut down choices. In contrast, ‘disconnected’ choosers, overwhelmingly working class, tend to see schools as all much the same, and therefore they generally choose the local school which is part of their community. Factors such as distance, facilities, safety, convenience, and locality are of prime concern.

A lack of interest in other schools should not necessarily be taken to imply a lack of interest in their children’s education. In fact, Gewirtz *et al* (1995) believe that, though all three groups are interested in their children’s education, the market system may not reflect the interests of the ‘disconnected’ as it does the other groups, choice being constituted in terms that reflect middle-class norms (Reay and Ball, 1997). Members of the ‘disconnected’ group are more likely to be concerned with the availability of a high-quality

local school and less interested in the evaluation of the different qualities of a range of accessible schools. The choice system, as presently constituted, is likely to advantage the 'privileged' choosers, based as it is on a competitive, market model that encourages the tendency of working class parents, generally less knowledgeable about the choice system and opportunities, to 'play safe' and avoid risks (Reay and Ball, 1997).

The distinctions made by Ball and his colleagues between different social groups in their approach to school choice have been challenged by Tooley (1997) on the basis of the lack of rigour in their primarily qualitative methodology. This critique was stoutly defended by Ball and Gewirtz (1997). The research presented in this thesis, by revealing the extent of socio-economic variation in out-of-catchment movement in the case study area, and contextualising these findings through the conduct of individual interviews with parents, can help to clarify this issue.

3.3.2 The neighbourhood/community level.

Individual choices of secondary school are not made in a vacuum. Parents are commonly influenced by their friends, the neighbourhood within which they live and the community of which they are part. However, if choice of out-of-catchment school is increasing, then the traditional 'Fordist' scenario of a school solely serving the needs of its catchment population may be replaced by a more postmodern reality where parents base their school choice not just on locality, but far more on which schools most reflect their own perceived identities. Such a trend could well lead to increased social fragmentation in neighbourhoods containing diverse social or ethnic groups.

Is the increasing exercise of parental choice leading to greater social fragmentation within some neighbourhoods?

The OECD comparative study into parental choice in the United Kingdom, France, Denmark, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA (Hirsch, 1994) discovered strong evidence in a number of countries that choice can increase social segregation within the education system. One reason was the importance of parents' knowledge of who else was choosing a school, a consideration that does not normally show up in parental surveys. Comprehensive systems with strong catchment policies forced parents who objected to their local school either to 'go private' or move into the catchment of a more favoured alternative. Those who stayed were left with what Hirschmann (1970) described as the 'voice' option, namely trying to improve schools from within. The dilution of LEA powers to limit choice allowed parents the 'exit' option. Greater use by one social group of this option, middle-class parents worried about inner-city problems, for instance, will inevitably lead to increased polarisation amongst the local community in terms of school choice. Gewirtz *et al* (1995) believe that the social characteristics of a school's intake is a fundamental influence on choice making. For example, working class schools would be marked by a sense of 'otherness' for middle-class parents, as might schools with a predominantly Asian intake for the parents of white children (and vice-versa). The extent of such 'negative' choices may clearly be an important ingredient in the mix of factors that lead to a high degree of fluidity in pupil movements.

Questions of physical safety and 'social mixing' are increasingly seen as factors in choice. Lawton (1992) found that when choice is exercised it tends to be on the basis of safety of access or the 'quality' of the area. In view of contemporary fears of drugs, violence and general indiscipline in inner-cities, it is perhaps not surprising that evidence is mounting that middle-class parents living in mixed residential areas are increasingly choosing 'safe'

suburban or rural schools (Dore and Prestage, 1995). The middle-class parents who continue to favour inner-city schools that are experiencing such an exodus will soon become aware of the social polarisation of the local school and the alternative choices made by many of their friends and neighbours. Concern about inner-city safety is not confined to the middle-classes, though, and Gewirtz *et al* (1995) found evidence that 'aspiring' working class parents were adding their own children to the inner-city exodus for this reason.

Of course, many catchments were already strongly segregated before the 1988 Act, most commonly because of the social geography of cities. Primary schools in Southampton, for instance, were linked to secondary schools as if it were intended to keep social groups apart (Mar Molinero, 1988). Nevertheless, Agnew (1978), considering the requirements for a school to be properly comprehensive, remarked that good neighbourhood schools need integrated neighbourhoods and schools cannot achieve this on their own: planning and housing policy must play a part. The 1998 Act has not particularly helped in this respect and 'selection by mortgage' remains an important allocative mechanism (Carroll and Walford, 1996).

Besides the service they provide for parents in educating their children, secondary schools can also be seen as a resource for the local neighbourhood. Through the provision of academic, cultural and sporting facilities for adults, as well as children, schools can make a valuable contribution to the sense of local community. However, increased expression of parental choice is likely to reduce the strength of people's identification with the neighbourhood school as membership of a common social group becomes more likely to determine the intake of a school than geographical convenience (Bondi, 1988). This could harm the desired 'community school' status of many secondary establishments. Of more

direct concern to this thesis is the possibility that such changes in attendance patterns could lead to the school closures that the Conservative government saw as a natural outcome of their education policy.

Phipps and Holden's study of the closure of a school in Saskatoon, Canada, provides an insight into the value to parents of a local school. They found that the switch from a short walk to school to a 25 to 30 minute bus ride would be the third most important of twelve household utility functions for *all* residents, with half of them considering this an important enough change to make them want to move house. It was the loss of this existing amenity that appeared most important as this was a much less important utility function for people who moved into houses with an *existing* journey of that length. The school is also important to non-child rearers, a neighbourhood focal point, resource centre and eventual sales feature of a home (Phipps and Holden, 1985). The significance of the school's role in the community has played little part in the parental choice debate and is not a main focus of this research. However, a school that serves a socially mixed neighbourhood may become socially polarised if it increasingly fails to attract the children of the more affluent parents. The social integration of the neighbourhood itself may then be reduced, as the local school becomes less representative of the local community as a whole. The potential for such consequences should be borne in mind in the analysis of pupil flows.

3.3.3 The school.

The previous section considered the neighbourhood and community aspects of parental choice. The educational literature reveals a far greater concern for the consequences of choice on the schools, themselves, for their ability to maintain academic standards and even for their continued viability. Many researchers have expressed fears that able pupils from more deprived catchments will be 'creamed off' to schools in more prosperous areas.

Indeed, a school's educational quality, as measured by GCSE results, is strongly correlated with the socio-economic characteristics of its intake (e.g. Mortimore and Mortimore, 1986; McPherson and Willms, 1987; Moulden and Bradford, 1984; Goldstein *et al*, 1993; Higgs *et al*, 1997a; Gibson and Asthana, 1998). In this context, schools are likely to be increasingly competitive in their marketing. However, increased fluidity of pupil movements is likely to make planning by schools increasingly difficult. Although this study makes no attempt to evaluate the educational impact of parental choice, as changing patterns of pupil movement are likely to have educational implications, all these issues are worthy of note in establishing an awareness of the full range of consequences of the 1988 Act.

Are schools becoming increasingly socially polarised?

The 'creaming off' of able pupils from relatively deprived catchments to schools in more affluent neighbourhoods is one of the greatest concerns expressed in the literature (Adler and Raab, 1988; Ball, 1993; Mar Molinero, 1988; Le Grand, 1991; Bradford, 1991; Smith and Noble, 1995). Adler and Raab (1988) in their study of schools in Edinburgh and Dundee found movements out-of-catchment most strongly correlated with school examination attainment measures. The schools that lost most pupils were in the least prosperous parts of the cities. The 'strong' version of parental choice that has been implemented in New Zealand has also provided clear evidence of schools in deprived areas suffering as the 'best' pupils living locally are preferentially recruited by more favourably sited schools.

Further evidence of such outflows was provided by Bartlett (1993) whose study of 50 schools in one county identified sometimes subtle selection mechanisms that were weighted against children from deprived backgrounds. One example cited was the

necessity for both parents of the child of a single mother to attend an interview. A decline in pupil quality in the intakes of inner-city schools will be reflected by a worsening of examination results and a further decline in these schools' appeal to parents. However, there is evidence against the cream-skimming hypothesis. A recent empirical analysis in South Wales (Gorard and Fitz, 1998) found that overall social polarisation in secondary schools in 6 South Wales unitary authorities had actually decreased in recent years.

Gorard and Fitz's findings fly in the face of the expectations of most parental choice researchers, but their study did not explain how the operation of educational markets produced the decrease in social stratification. This study can establish both whether social polarisation within schools has increased in the case study area and the mechanisms that underlie any changes in the social characteristics of school intakes. The research presented in this thesis will examine the relative fortunes of schools in catchments of contrasting social character, and its longitudinal nature is extremely valuable in this context.

The contemporary educational landscape is, however, more complex than a simple division into 'deprived' and 'affluent' schools, corresponding to the socio-economic characteristics of their catchments. Various hierarchical models of school systems have been put forward (e.g. Burdett, 1988; Ball *et al*, 1995; Woods, 1996; Edwards and Whitty, 1997) which discriminate between structural categories such as LEA maintained, Grant Maintained, private schools and City Technology Colleges, and academic categories such as low-achieving secondary modern or 'sink' comprehensive schools, 'mid-table' suburban comprehensive schools serving academically mixed populations and high-achieving selective schools. Neo-liberal proponents of the educational market such as Hargreaves (1996) believe parental choice to be a mechanism that should, if effective, produce increased diversification in the characteristics of schools as they target particular types of

children. Most evidence points, however, to a tendency for schools to respond with a defensive uniformity to the challenge of the market, highlighting traditional values and symbols such as discipline and school uniforms rather than engaging in creative innovation (Fitz *et al*, 1997; Glatter *et al*, 1997). Nevertheless, the menu from which parents choose a school for their child is potentially bewildering and this study will pay particular regard to the ways in which parents categorise and rank schools when making their choice.

One of the most vigorous debates about current educational policy concerns the degree to which a school's success is dependent on its social composition. A related debate addresses the possibility of calculating 'value-added' measures that take into account such a relationship when assessing a school's effectiveness. This research cannot fully address these concerns but, because the practical consequences of changing patterns of pupil attendance are likely to be important factors in a school's future success, a short discussion of these issues is appropriate.

The existence of a correlation between the socio-economic character of a school's intake and its educational attainment is well documented (see references cited at the start of this section). As Bradford (1991: 324) writes: "Geographers might say that where you live, the people you interact with, and attitudes and values you share or to which you aspire, may affect your behaviour". Current measures of school attainment used in the published league tables feature such bald statistics as numbers of children gaining GCSE grade 'C' and above. Most educationalists argue that a more effective measure of a school's worth would take account of the social background of its intake and more accurately represent the 'value-added' by the school to a child's individual learning and attainment (e.g. Sammons *et al*, 1994; Goldstein and Thomas, 1996; Gibson and Asthana, 1998).

The academic performance of a school may not just be dependent on the aggregate socio-economic characteristics of its intake, but also on its social mix (Bradford, 1991; Thrupp, 1995). In crude terms, we would not expect a school containing only children from very deprived and very affluent backgrounds to perform in the same way as one whose intake consisted entirely of pupils from a 'middle of the range' milieu. We would expect pupils' behaviour and interactions within the school to differ in the two scenarios and would not be surprised if academic results differed, even though the average pupil socio-economic status would be the same for both groups. It is certainly arguable that "Given that the existence of a significant school mix effect would suggest the importance of policies to balance school mix through state intervention, the question of school mix is central to recent debate over the role of the state in education" Thrupp (1995: 196). The research in this thesis can contribute to that debate by providing empirical evidence of the extent to which school mixes are changing in the new era of parental choice.

Is the educational market leading to an increase in competition and uncertainty for schools?

For schools, the relative desirability and availability of pupils from differing social backgrounds may influence the way they market themselves. Pupil-led funding requires schools to take marketing increasingly seriously and in some circumstances they may need to compete vigorously with each other. Academic studies (e.g. West, 1992) and consultancy reports (e.g. Webster *et al*, 1993) provide an increasing volume of advice to schools on how they should best sell themselves to particular market segments. Typically, the presentation of a disciplined, 'safe' environment conducive to learning is seen as crucial for middle-class parents, and policies such as strong school uniform codes are a sign of a school's adherence to such values. Open days and evenings, in particular, provide

important opportunities for schools to present themselves in a favourable light to particular groups of parents.

The importance of marketing schools can vary considerably, however, and Gewirtz *et al* (1995) emphasise the importance of context in dictating the relevance of marketing and competition for a particular school. Successful schools in middle-class areas need to devote less energy to marketing, while local community schools in socio-spatially coherent working class, 'village-like' neighbourhoods can primarily focus on defensively keeping local children. Schools in more intermediate positions can be forced to be much more aggressive, seeking to attract the 'right sort of pupil', the perception of whom is seen as increasingly based on a crude two-fold categorisation. On the one hand, high-ability children with supportive parents will improve a school's league table standing with little extra investment. On the other hand, less able, problematic children, often with special needs and unsupportive parents, can be expensive and troublesome to educate and may drive away the 'high-ability' children. The marked increase in pupil exclusions in recent years may well reflect an increased concern with these issues and with school image.

There is substantial evidence (e.g. Woods, 1993; Gewirtz *et al*, 1995) that the government's educational legislation has made schools much more competitive, with some researchers claiming that, increasingly, it is the schools, rather than parents, who choose. There is concern that white, middle-class children are preferred to those from under-privileged backgrounds and ethnic minorities. Selection by 11-plus and other methods is still a factor in some LEAs, but elsewhere more subtle choice mechanisms may exist, such as the use of application forms which disadvantage less literate parents (see Deem, 1994; Gewirtz *et al*, 1995 for further examples). There is little firm evidence of such methods playing a significant role in the determination of a school's intake but it is important not to

overlook their potential for influencing parents' decisions and thus affecting inter-catchment flows.

The increased importance of the market in education leads not only to greater opportunities and threats but also to lower levels of certainty over future events, so that it is difficult for schools to allocate resources for future years confidently. These days "even over-subscribed schools feel there is little need for 'complacency' and there is a perception of volatility and fashion in parental choice" (Gewirtz *et al*, 1995: 125). If movement out of catchment is predictable or change is gradual, this is less likely to be a problem. If there are chaotic elements in the system and 'ripple effects', with intakes at one school dependent on the changing fortunes of another, then confident prediction of future intakes may be impossible. The longitudinal nature of the present study allows some analysis of the extent to which long-term change in pupil-flows is predictable.

3.3.4 The LEA.

The highest aggregate level examined by this research is that of the LEA. For this educational tier the importance of the inter-relationships between parental choices and schools throughout a local system becomes especially important. There may also be interactions with neighbouring LEAs, particularly when there are convenient transport links to schools across their boundaries. LEAs have traditionally been responsible for the management of secondary school transfers. Nowadays, their role is much reduced, though the extent of their loss of influence varies considerably across the country. This section discusses the current role of LEA procedures in parental choice, the persistence of variation in LEA secondary transfer systems, and the planning difficulties faced by LEAs because of uncertainties about future parental decisions. It also considers the key issue for this thesis,

namely the extent to which pupil movements between catchments are becoming increasingly fluid and what characterises such fluidity.

Does the practical implementation of LEA procedures play a significant role in the nature and extent of the expression of parental choice?

Stillman and Maychell (1986) found that in the 1980s LEA procedures were often the most important aspect of the 'reality' of choice of secondary school. More recent legislation may have reduced the discretion and flexibility available to LEAs but Jowett (1995) found a continuing diversity in local policy and identified four models of transfer procedure:

- Parents providing LEAs with their first (and sometimes second) preference and with over-subscription decided by set criteria
- LEAs allocating children to a local school, with parents responsible for asking for an alternative
- Parents applying directly to individual schools (typically to GM schools)
- A straightforward 11-plus system

In some LEAs there were combinations of different models.

A question of great relevance to this study is: do catchment systems still play a meaningful part in secondary transfer procedures? Recent research (e.g. Jowett, 1995; Mayet, 1997) reveals that they have a role of enduring significance in many parts of the country. Although some LEAs specify over-subscription admissions criteria that have no substantial spatial component, these are the exception (and mostly in London). One study (Jowett, 1995) found that half of the 12 LEAs surveyed used catchment areas as a primary over-subscription criterion, while all but one of the others used a phrase about distance (and distance criteria, as Stillman and Maychell (1986) noted, can approximate to a catchment

policy). Catchment boundaries do, then, retain a role in school transfers and, if school rolls rise and out-of-catchment moves increase in popularity, then an increasing proportion of school choices will be decided by which side of a catchment boundary a child lives.

Other aspects of LEA procedures besides the designation of catchments can be important in the choice process, including the existence of a common co-ordinated transfer procedure. In particular, the quality of information about transfer procedures available to parents may be an important factor in the level of inter-catchment movements (Mayet, 1997) though Jowett (1995) suggests that LEAs are patronising when they doubt the ability of many parents to act in their children's best interests in systems where the LEA has no co-ordinating role. Most commentators (e.g. Stillman and Maychell, 1986; Walford, 1990; Bowe *et al*, 1994; Gewirtz *et al*, 1995), however, believe that working class parents are generally much less skilful in their ability to use the transfer process in their own best interests. The skills of middle-class parents cited include confidence in form filling and fluency in arguing a case at interview. Such advantages will preferentially help their children gain a place at a more popular out-of-catchment school in comparison with those who have less confidence and ability when dealing with administrative hurdles.

An LEA's secondary school transfer procedures may, then, be a contingent factor relevant to studies of school choice, and their influence on parental decision-making processes and outcomes is an important consideration in this study. Furthermore, the continuing variability of LEA procedures in conjunction with the national, regional and local spatial variation in other aspects of education provision revealed by Bradford (1990) counsels against being too bold in extrapolating from any local findings to a general conclusion.

Has parental choice made planning more difficult for LEAs?

The literature provides differing pictures of how problematic parental choice has proved for LEAs. On the one hand, de-centralisation of responsibility to schools has left the more laissez-faire LEAs with a simpler, enabling role, purely facilitating the transfer process. The majority of LEAs, however, remain pro-active, retaining a significant responsibility for planning which is complicated by the greater unpredictability of the market environment.

Certainly, it is no longer possible directly to socially engineer schools' intakes, as some LEAs used to do, through the manipulation of catchment boundaries to achieve particular balances of social or ethnic groups (Stillman and Maychell, 1986). However, even in the pre-1988 days, the drawing of catchments was often a result of temporary political convenience and, once established, LEAs tended to be very reluctant to modify them (Mars Molinero, 1988). One consequence of this inertia is the potential for spatially differentiated demographic change to lead to growing disparities between populations in separate catchments. Schools with similar capacities may have *catchments* with very different population sizes. In systems where catchments are used in parental preference criteria setting, such disparities obviously affect the potential for flows between catchments. A school with a catchment population below its capacity will need to attract pupils from elsewhere and may specifically target pupils from particular areas or specific socio-economic groups. A school with a surplus in its catchment population may use subtle, unofficial mechanisms favouring more academic or 'disciplined' children or may simply be less concerned with the loss of pupils to other schools in the system. This research, with the benefit of the longitudinal view, will establish, as far as possible, whether incongruity between *de facto* and *de jure* catchments exists in the case-study area.

The longitudinal nature of the analysis will also allow examination of the extent to which uncertainty over fluctuations in future pupil flows may be a real problem for LEAs, a problem that was mentioned above in relation to schools. There are fears that an inability to confidently predict future pupil numbers for each school will lead to serious resource inefficiencies for LEAs (Higgs *et al*, 1997b). Previously, the main management problem was falling rolls leading to physical over-capacity in the secondary school sector. The ability of LEAs to manage falling rolls was, in some respects, hindered by the 1988 Act, with schools wishing to avoid closure prominent amongst those 'opting out' of LEA control (Burdett, 1988; Walford, 1990; Bradford, 1995). The return of rising rolls presents LEAs with a different problem because parents now have much greater expectations of their ability to choose a school for their child. Mayet (1997) in a survey of eight LEAs, found that, on average, officials believed a 5% buffer between the population of children in a catchment and schools' physical capacity was needed to allow parents more effective scope for choice. Rising rolls may see the large increase in appeals (from 234 in 1988 to 935 in Birmingham (Mayet, 1997), for instance) continue unchecked.

The final threat to an LEA's ability to match future pupil numbers to the school's physical accommodation has been the threat or fact of conversion to grant maintained status. This threat partially arises from the risk of schools opting out and triggering the 10 and 75 per cent thresholds whereby the Funding Agency for Schools either shares or takes over responsibility for transfer procedures. Perhaps more importantly, the loss of just one school to Grant Maintained status (assuming they do not co-operate in admissions arrangements) removes an LEA's ability to control, or comprehensively manage admissions arrangements. Such a change also handicaps research and planning through the loss of a complete statistical picture of pupil movements, preferences and appeals in their area.

The latter point needs stressing. Research into the effects of parental choice has been severely handicapped by the inability of LEAs to act as a centralised source of information about education in their area once secondary schools have opted out their control (Mayet, 1997; Gewirtz *et al*, 1995). In particular, it is not possible to give regional or national figures for the numbers of parents who have their secondary school preference satisfied because of the number of authorities who have only a partial picture (Mayet, 1997). One of the main advantages of the case-study area for this research is the availability of research data from 1991 to 1995 for the whole of the LEA area. Even here, the decision of one school to become Grant Maintained in 1995 has removed the possibility of indefinitely continuing the longitudinal analysis without some limitation of the overall picture.

Are catchments becoming more permeable and, if so, can different catchment types be categorised and can the characteristics that make them more or less permeable be identified?

The final two issues to be discussed in this chapter are central to this thesis. Almost without exception, the general expectation in the literature is for an increased level of pupil movement, as traditional catchments become more permeable. However, the dearth of quantitative longitudinal analysis since 1988 prevents the drawing of solid conclusions.

Adler *et al*'s (1989) Scottish study revealed that the number of secondary placing requests (for a school other than the local one) in Edinburgh and Dundee almost doubled from 1982 to 1985 following the Scottish legislation equivalent to the 1988 Act. No study in England and Wales has provided such a longitudinal view of catchment permeability (and even the Scottish study examined inter-catchment movements in detail for one year only, thus reducing its explanatory power). Most English studies have been snapshots that fail to address adequately process and change in school choice (Ball, 1997; Higgs *et al*, 1997b).

English research has been much more concerned with identifying the types of catchment or neighbourhood that are most permeable. Most research has concentrated on socio-economic variation in choice procedures. However, Gewirtz *et al* (1993), quote Pahl (1970) to the effect that analysing the distribution of inequality in an educational system requires a socio-spatial model where there are fundamental *spatial* constraints in access to scarce urban resources (usually expressed in terms of time/cost distance) as well as *social* constraints. The relative importance of these constraints will vary, and they must both form part of the analysis.

Considering spatial aspects first, then, catchment shape itself may be important, with compact, hexagon-like shapes generally the goal in catchment modelling (Sutcliffe and Board, 1986). The assumption is that more linear or irregular shapes will increase permeability, as a greater percentage of the population will live near to a catchment boundary. Natural features and major transport routes are also commonly used in boundaries (Bondi, 1988) and are often significant barriers to pupil out-flows. Distance from alternative schools is naturally also an important factor in a school's ability to attract local children, as seen in the contrast between urban and rural areas. Catchments are not, though, always 'logically' designed. Gewirtz *et al* (1995) believe LEA catchment boundaries, for instance, to be ultimately arbitrary in market terms, often cutting across 'natural' catchment areas or spatial localities.

Concern over socio-economic variation in catchment permeability has been primarily focused on the loss of middle-class and brighter working class children from schools in more deprived areas. This was discussed previously in this chapter, in the sections on neighbourhoods and schools. Other factors can be relevant, such as the range and diversity

of schools within an LEA's boundaries. For example, Gewirtz *et al* (1993) identified four distinct groupings of schools within the three LEAs they studied:

- Local community comprehensive schools
- Cosmopolitan, high profile, elite maintained schools (including selective schools)
- A local system of day independent private schools
- Catholic schools

No doubt different 'circuits' could be modelled elsewhere but the spatial distribution of different school types relative to the homes of the parents most likely to be attracted them can be expected to be a significant determinant of the overall extent of out-of-catchment movement.

Adler *et al* (1989) point out the importance of 'bandwagon effects' of the type that were explained earlier in the section on systems theory. A popular school will attract more and more of the 'right' sort of pupil, making it even more attractive for parents in subsequent years and *vice-versa*, of course. Perhaps the most important stabilising factor in the system - school admissions limits - comes into play here. If a school becomes more popular and catchment or distance are used as over-subscription criteria and the school admissions limit is not raised, then correspondingly greater numbers of local parents will send their children to that school and the catchment's permeability will decrease (Carroll and Walford, 1996).

Given the other social factors discussed previously, this would, in general, lead to middle-class catchments of low permeability while other catchment's permeability would be dependent on a number of factors among which would be the 'excess capacity' at 'middle-class' comprehensives. This research aims to put flesh on the bones of such speculation by

identifying the spatial and socio-economic factors that make one catchment more permeable than another.

3.3 Research objectives.

The specific objectives of this study are now set out in the context of the preceding discussion of the issues and literature relevant to parental choice of secondary school. The initial exploration of theoretical perspectives concluded that a holistic approach to the research was appropriate with different methods appropriate at different levels of the system. The objectives will, therefore, be grouped in the same way and using the same levels/scales as in the previous section. The objectives are written in the form of questions to be addressed.

The parent.

The literature revealed that most parents appeared to consider ‘process’ more important than ‘product’ factors, though there was considerable variation between the different surveys. It was recognised that much of the variation in findings may arise from a combination of spatial and socio-economic contextual factors. Some parents were seen to be more adept in their ability to navigate the choice process than others. The research will attempt to clarify this issue and establish the socio-economic characteristics of parents in different parts of the case-study area.

Throughout the literature spatial aspects, such as distance from school and proximity to catchment boundaries are seen as important influences on choice, but there has been little in-depth analysis of this topic. The study will identify the relative importance of spatial factors for different parental groups.

Objective 1. What characterises parents who express a preference for a school other than the local catchment comprehensive? What factors in choice are important and what limits parents in their choice?

Objective 2. How important are spatial factors for parents in the choice of school relative to other considerations?

Neighbourhood/community.

Neighbourhood influences have been shown to be potentially of considerable significance for parental choices. This may be because a child's friends may all go to the same school or parents may be seeking to move their child to a 'safer' school environment. There has been valuable research into these aspects of choice in the more qualitative studies, but quantitative studies are scarce. Given the potential importance of an individual parent or child's attitude to their surrounding neighbourhood, such factors demand careful investigation in this study.

However, geographical factors may limit the degree to which parents can express choices. Concern has been expressed that low-status groups and areas may be disadvantaged in their access to the new educational market. It is necessary to discover both the extent to which parents in different types of neighbourhood are making use of their 'right to choose' and whether they vary in the degree to which they wish to choose an out-of-catchment school. Rural parents, for example, face obvious limitations in their choice but there has been little evidence in the last ten years of the extent to which they are satisfied with this.

Increased choice has led to fears of increased social segregation, particularly in the inner cities, as middle-class parents secure places in 'safe' suburban schools for their children. It

would be valuable to know the extent to which this is a continuing trend and the social range of parents choosing this ‘escape route’.

Objective 3. What variation is there, spatially and socio-economically, in the factors contributing to choice of secondary school by parents?

Objective 4. What variation is there, spatially and socio-economically, in the extent of choice available to parents?

Objective 5. What variation is there, spatially and socio-economically, in the extent to which parents choose out of catchment schools?

The school.

There has been considerable concern expressed in the literature that certain types of (predominantly middle-class) school will benefit from the competitive market at the expense of schools in low status areas that are already deprived of resources. The brightest pupils in the catchments of these ‘sink-schools’ will increasingly desert them for more attractive schools elsewhere. The schools themselves are much more concerned with marketing and projecting the right image to particular segments of their market; the more ‘troublesome’ type of pupil may be unwanted. However, even successful schools may experience difficulties in planning ahead if they find it hard to predict the size and social composition of their future intake. This research, by examining school recruitment in relation to parents, the local catchment and other schools in the area, can provide valuable insights into the factors that make particular schools more, or less, successful in attracting children from their competitors’ catchments.

Objective 6. Is parental choice benefiting certain types of school?

Objective 7. What effects are changing pupil flows having on the social mix of secondary schools?

The LEA.

At this level we address the key question in this thesis. Throughout the parental choice debate the assumption has been that parents will increasingly choose out-of-catchment schools for their children. There has been surprisingly little research to assess this belief. This study will establish for the case-study area the extent to which catchment permeability has grown in the period 1991 to 1995 and what factors characterise catchments that are more or less likely to lose children to other schools.

There have been expressions of concern over the inability of LEAs to plan future resource allocations when the market has introduced such uncertainty into the local educational system. The predictability of changes in catchment permeability in the case-study area will be analysed so that there can be some assessment of the reality of such concerns. Another potential source of unpredictability for LEAs is pupil flows into its schools from adjoining authorities. Consequently, the importance of such moves as a factor in the overall pattern of parental choices will be evaluated.

Some researchers working from a more managerialist perspective have emphasised the importance of LEA procedures in determining who gains access to particular schools. This study examines the influence which the rules and timing of the secondary transfer process have on different groups of parents. In particular, the continued relevance and influence of school catchments will be examined.

Objective 8. To what extent is overall choice of out-of-catchment schools increasing?

Objective 9. For the LEA as a whole, has there been a resultant increase in the average length of journey to school?

Objective 10. Can catchments be characterised in relation to their permeability?

Objective 11. Are catchments still significant for the case-study LEA?

Objective 12. What role do LEA admissions procedures play in the choice of school?

Objective 13. Is it increasingly difficult for LEAs to manage the system?

Objective 14. What contribution does the choices of parents who live outside the LEA make to the overall pattern of pupil movements?

3.4 Synopsis.

Whilst the various theoretical approaches discussed in the first part of the chapter may not have been explicitly referenced in the second part, they proved very useful in teasing out the issues and questions of importance to this thesis. In particular, the realist concept of society having different structures, processes and mechanisms revealed at different levels of reality is fundamental to the methodological approach adopted. One aspect of parental choice research that should have become manifestly clear is its multi-faceted character. The whole process is certainly complex and operates through a variety of mechanisms at a variety of levels. Some previous research has been ‘captured by the discourse’ of the market and failed sufficiently to place the research in a larger context. Other research has been strong on theory but poor in empirical evidence. There has been a particular scarcity of research that adequately considers spatial aspects of choice, links the individual decision to the system within which it is made, and is more than a snapshot that freezes, rather than explains a process.

This study uses an LEA area case-study approach, as this is the only practicable way of examining the whole system in anything approaching sufficient detail with the available resources. Use of such an approach, in the knowledge that secondary school transfer systems continue to be highly diverse, cautions against simple generalisation of the results. However, there are features of the case-study area that make it, to some extent, representative of the wider system, and these will be discussed in Chapter four.

Chapter 4. The case study area: educational and geographical characteristics and their relevance to this research.

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter it was stated that the analysis of parental decision-making is best suited to a case study approach that focuses on the way choice processes and outcomes operate at the level of the parent, the school, the neighbourhood and the secondary school system. This chapter describes how the case study area was chosen for this thesis, why it was considered to be suitable for this research and the particular local issues that were apparent at the start of the study.

A brief account of the genesis of this research is followed by a description of the extent to which the social, geographical and educational characteristics of the area allow qualified generalisation to the rest of the country. The system of secondary school catchments within the area underwent radical alteration in the 1980s. These changes are placed in the administrative, educational and political context of the time. The LEA's secondary transfer procedures, potentially important influences on parental decisions, are then outlined. The chapter finishes with a summary of the results of the pilot study that was a precursor to this research.

As stated in the introduction, one feature of the schools' attitude to this study was immediately apparent: their apprehensions of 'market-sensitive' research findings, such as trends in school popularity, becoming public. In order to guarantee the anonymity of schools, certain artifices have been used in this thesis. The case study area is referred to as

'Eastland' and the major urban area 'Northwick'. Individual schools have been allocated alphanumeric codes and geographical features and school catchment boundaries have been generalised in figures.

4.2 Research origins.

Several lecturers working in a geography department in the south of England in the early 1990s also acted as secondary school governors. They were all struck by the potential of the measures contained in the 1988 Education Reform Act to generate changes in traditional patterns of pupil home to secondary school movements. Examination of the parental choice literature revealed the dearth of research on the spatial aspects of parents' decision-making processes that was identified in the previous chapter. One of the lecturers had a good relationship with a particular LEA that was concerned about the possible consequences of the 1988 Act for its planning function. The LEA readily agreed to the establishment of a pilot study that would examine the spatial pattern of year-six transfers to secondary school within their area in 1991.

The aims of the pilot study were:

- to assess how far Eastland was successful in providing pupils with places at the school of their parents' choice
- to determine the extent to which final year primary children were moving on to schools other than their catchment secondary school
- to determine the origin of year-7 pupils for each of Eastland's comprehensive, grammar and denominational schools, and to identify any general patterns in the movement of pupils between catchments and schools

- to determine the feasibility of developing a data handling system that would enable (a) the regular monitoring of year-7 intakes and (b) the identification of future changes in the patterns of pupil movement

The results of this pilot study are summarised in Section 4.6. First, the characteristics of the area, its recent educational history and the transfer procedures prescribed by the LEA must be described.

4.3 The geographical and social characteristics of Eastland.

Eastland is one of the subsidiary areas of an LEA in the southern half of England. It encompasses the city of 'Northwick', whose population exceeds a quarter of a million, together with its extensive rural hinterland. There is a limited exchange of secondary pupils with neighbouring LEAs (in particular with one town close to Northwick on the eastern border), but this amounts to less than 4% of total secondary transfers. Eastland secondary transfers, therefore, essentially operate as a relatively closed system and this feature makes it an especially suitable location for investigation of the questions identified in the previous chapter. There is only one administrative body to negotiate with and virtually all the data required to analyse pupil flows are available from the one source in the one format.

More importantly, in terms of academic justification of the selection of this area for a case study, the neighbourhoods within Eastland are highly diverse, with inner-city areas as deprived as any in the country, a large middle-class suburban zone and many quite isolated rural settlements. The presence of such a wide range of socio-economic groups facilitates the investigation of many of the class-related issues raised in the parental choice literature, in particular the relative success of schools in high- and low-status areas in attracting pupils. This socio-spatial diversity is accompanied by an educational mix that includes

comprehensive, denominational and grammar schools as well as private secondary education. The presence of grammar schools in Eastland make it, in some respects, an atypical educational system, though there may be a beneficial aspect to this local feature. If these public sector selective schools were absent it is highly probable that a significant proportion of those who attend them would instead join the 10% within the LEA who choose private schools and are consequently unrepresented in this study. Furthermore, their presence enriches the study by allowing the investigation of the effects of openly selective schools on the choice process.

The absence of communities of ethnic minorities in Eastland represents another reason why this cannot be considered a fully representative case-study. The previous chapter quoted research demonstrating how the ethnic mix of neighbourhoods and schools can be a profound influence on parents' choices. Any conclusions drawn from this study must be qualified by the recognition that they can say nothing about the role of ethnic factors in school choice. Again, this apparent weakness in the research design is, in other respects, an advantage. The influence of ethnicity on choice may be more easily perceived in other parts of the country when contrasted with a milieu in which this factor in choice is absent. Also, evaluation of the importance of variables that may be significant in parents' choices, such as gender and class, could be complicated when ethnic considerations are also contributing to decisions. Parents may give reasons they feel are socially acceptable for a particular choice of school when its ethnic composition is perhaps the real motive behind their choice.

While ethnic factors are not a major influence on pupil movements in Northwick the social composition of the city is highly likely to be so and it is briefly described here. In Figure 4.1 the Townsend deprivation index, which is described more fully in Chapter four, is used

to characterise the varying levels of affluence and deprivation within the city. In simple terms, the parts of the map where pupils' home locations are predominantly marked in blue are relatively advantaged middle-class areas whereas red predominates in areas of lower status with higher incidence of deprivation and social exclusion. These latter areas are characterised by council or former council housing or private rented accommodation. As the figure shows, the city can be crudely divided into three: a highly homogenous middle-class suburban zone to the west of the city, a central 'slice' characterised by a far more varied mix of neighbourhoods and to the east a predominance of low-status communities. The influence of this social geography on the educational geography of Northwick will now be demonstrated.

4.4 The educational history of the area since 1980.

The following account of the development of the secondary school system within Eastland is based on interviews with past and present staff of the LEA who cannot be identified because of the requirement for anonymity. The current system of secondary school catchments and the locations of the secondary schools in Eastland are shown in Figures 4.2 and 4.3. The school code prefixes represent:

NNC Comprehensive school in Northwick's western suburbs

ONC Comprehensive school in rest of Northwick

RC Rural comprehensive school

G Grammar school

D Denominational school

As can be seen, a selective system continues to operate in the area with three grammar schools in Northwick alongside two denominational schools (both Roman Catholic) and

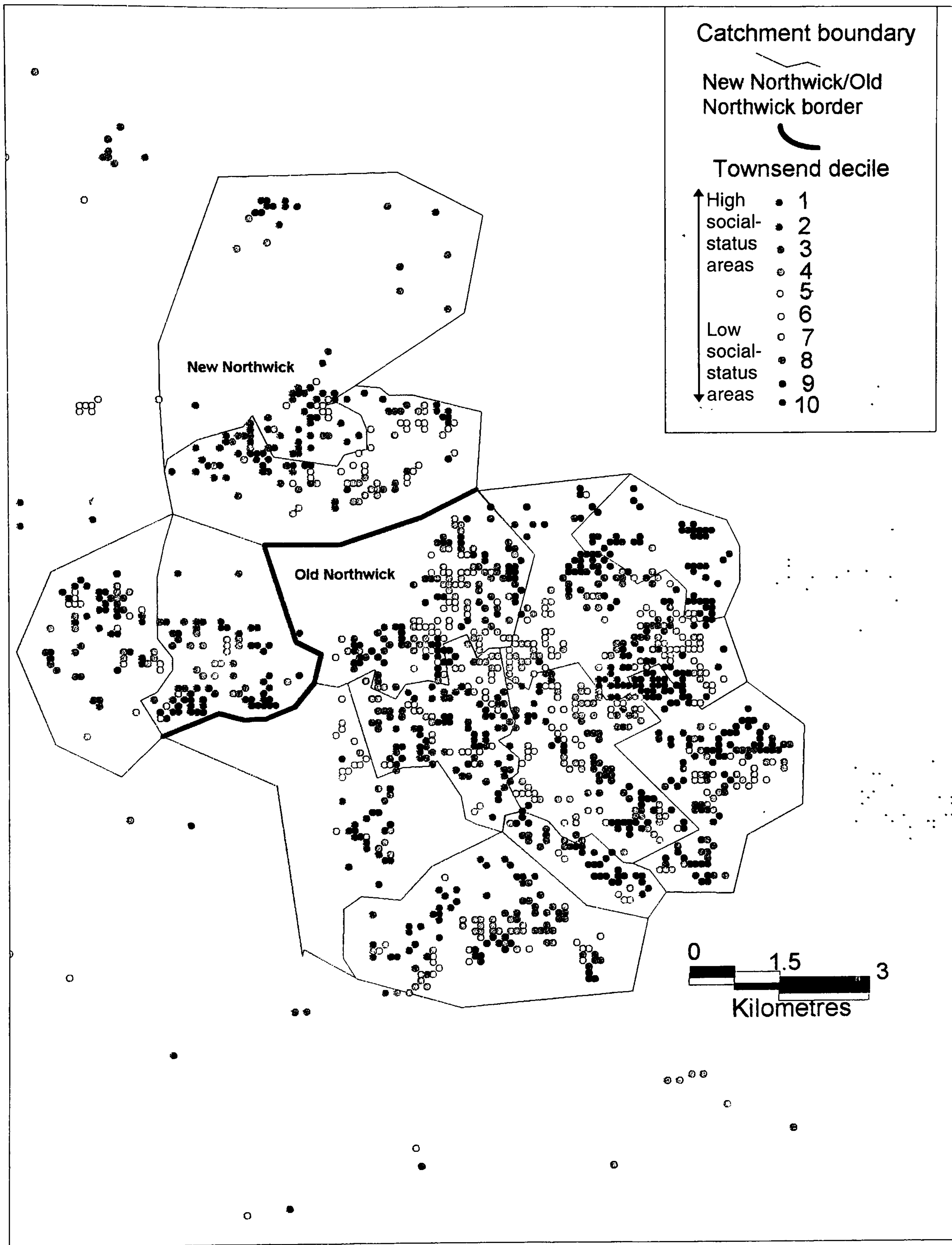


Figure 4.1 Socio-economic characteristics of Northwick pupils' home locations

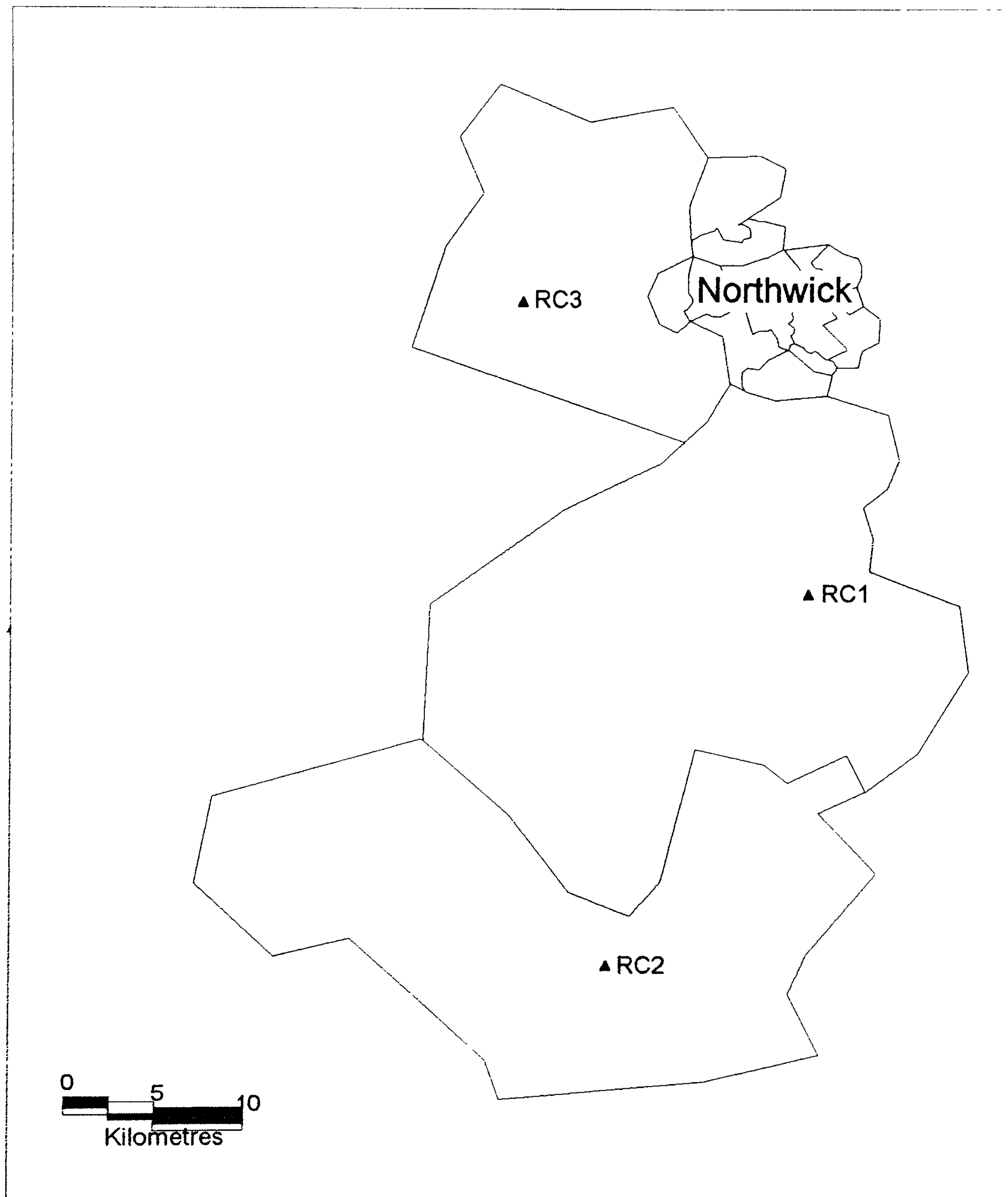


Figure 4.2 Eastland rural catchment boundaries

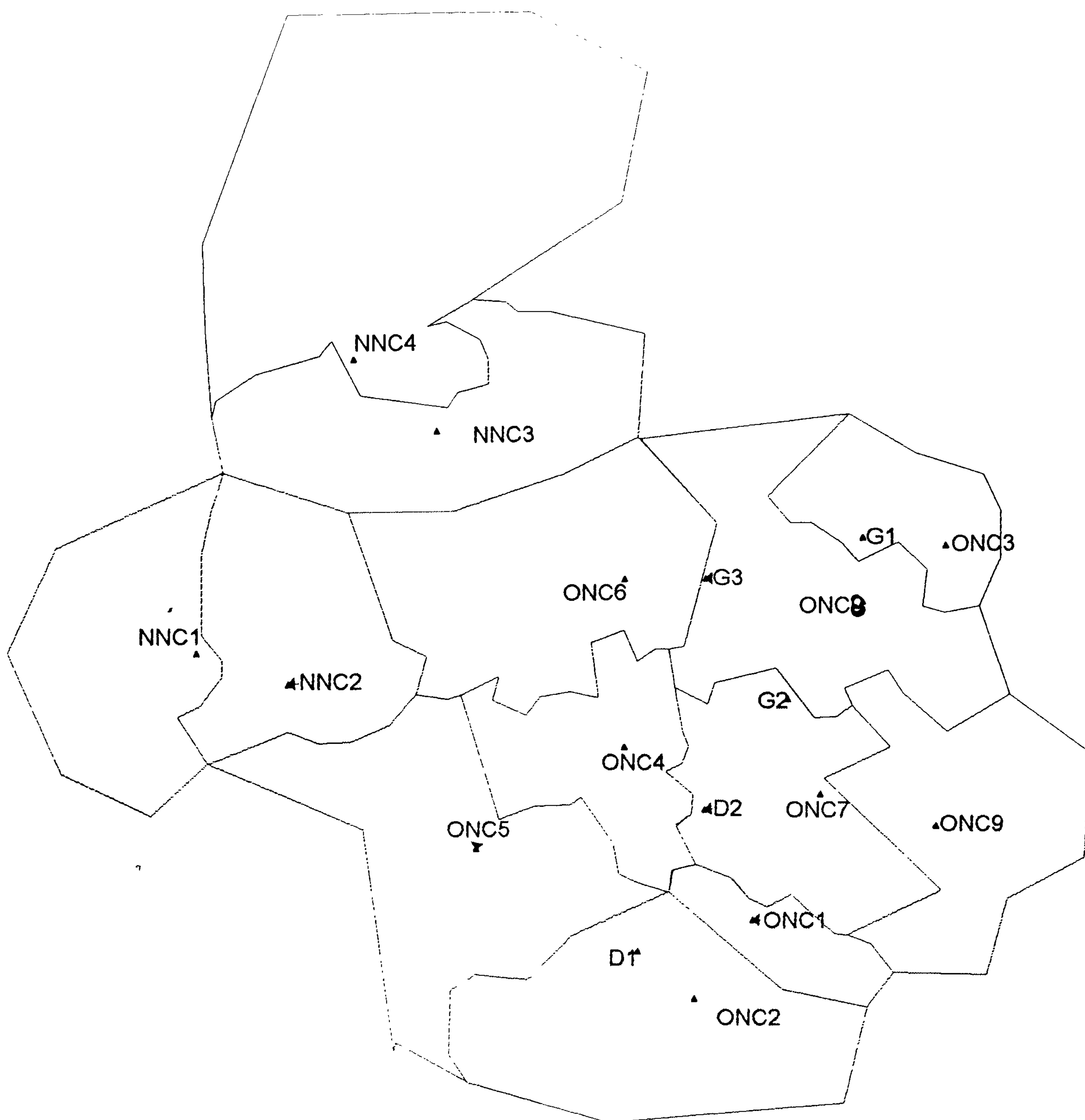


figure 4.3 - Northwick catchment boundaries

seventeen comprehensive schools. The system has been stable since 1991 but the ten preceding years witnessed substantial changes whose legacy still influences contemporary pupil movements. Eastland can effectively be split into three when considering the educational transformations of the 1980s: the rural sector, the western suburbs and the rest of the city.

The three rural secondary schools have been comprehensive since well before 1980. Although the grammar have always attracted a small proportion of their pupils from the rural catchments adjacent to the city, only a small proportion of parents, in the 1970s and 1980s, sent their children to anywhere other than their local comprehensive school. This was particularly true for RC2, which is much more isolated from the city than RC1 and RC3. The main alternative for parents in these areas, if they could afford it, were the private schools which provided approximately 10% of the secondary school places available in rural Eastland.

Within the city, the absence of grammar and denominational schools in the western suburbs is evidence for the distinctly bi-polar system that existed for the majority of 1980s. It is only in the last twenty years that most people have perceived this area as an integral part of the city. The local secondary system has developed relatively independently from the rest of Northwick. Given the importance of this spatial division of the city, this area will be described as 'New Northwick' and the central and eastern neighbourhoods as 'Old Northwick'.

The lack of opposition to comprehensive schools in New Northwick may be explained by the presence of a homogenous middle-class in these predominantly modern suburbs. These are schools that, in the terminology of West *et al*, (1994), appear 'pleasant' to parents and

offer relatively 'safe' environments for their children. New Northwick has been fully comprehensive since 1983 and there has been no significant demand for a return to selection in the area. Indeed, throughout the eighties the city grammars were believed to attract only a small proportion of pupils from these neighbourhoods, though this may have included a disproportionate number of the most academic children. Private schools were also notable by their absence in these neighbourhoods.

The two geographically detached suburbs that constitute New Northwick have good transport links with Old Northwick. Pupils can, on the whole, easily access either of the pairs of schools (NNC1/NNC2 and NNC3/NNC4) in their respective suburbs. Thus, for parents in each of these locations the most significant decision is likely to be which of their two local schools to choose. The growing population in most parts of these suburbs safeguarded their schools from re-organisation or excessive competition in the era of falling rolls, though the ageing population of NNC4 raised some concerns that it might have to close as part of a general reorganisation. However, its reputation and location in an attractive suburb allowed it to recruit significant numbers of pupils from Old Northwick throughout the 1980s to make up the balance. Indeed, at the beginning of the 1990s all four schools were perceived as successful comprehensives, potentially attractive options for parents in Old Northwick who were dissatisfied with their local school and did not wish to take the selective option.

New Northwick started and ended the 1980s with the same four secondary schools. It was a very different story, however, in Old Northwick. At the start of the decade there were nineteen secondary modern schools, nine grammar schools, four denominational schools, one comprehensive school and two private schools in this area. By 1991, the first year for which pupil transfer data were available for this study, secondary provision consisted of

three grammar schools, two denominational schools, nine comprehensive schools and two private schools: a configuration that has remained stable ever since.

A radical transformation of Old Northwick's educational provision was a necessary outcome of the falling school rolls that have been shown to be one of the driving forces behind the rise of parental choice throughout the country. Old Northwick differed from many other cities, however, in its retention into the 1980s of a well entrenched selective system with only one comprehensive (ONC4), a reflection of the social conservatism of the city. The reductions in pupil numbers forced the grammar schools to reduce their exclusivity to the extent that one of them admitted 45% of the ability range in one particular year. While the grammar schools lost some of their exclusivity, the secondary modern schools became increasingly educationally inefficient and uneconomic, with many unable to offer GCSEs and some accommodating less than a hundred pupils. The need for restructuring was universally acknowledged within the city.

The original plan was for a dual system in Old Northwick with comprehensives for the new estates (the area covered by the ONC4, ONC5 and ONC2 catchments) with the selective schools in the remaining inner city re-organised to reflect the changed demographics. The necessity to rationalise provision throughout the city and the plans for the new comprehensives provoked no serious opposition. However, the retention of a selective system was more controversial with opinions polarised along party political lines. The mid-1980s were a period of flux and uncertainty as changes of political control in local government and disputes with the Secretary of State for Education over re-organisation plans delayed the emergence of a new system. At the end of the decade, though, after a period characterised by the closure of all secondary modern and most grammar schools and the building of new purpose-built comprehensive schools the stable system illustrated in

Figure 4.3 emerged. Selection remained and the three grammar schools were well respected with places highly sought after. However, secondary education in Old Northwick was now predominantly provided by comprehensive schools (though some dispute the possibility of a true comprehensive school existing when a neighbouring grammar can attract the most academically able from pupils from its catchment).

Between 1981 and 1991 twenty grammar and secondary modern schools had been closed in the city with relatively little opposition, though there was considerable controversy about the educational character of the system which would replace them. The co-incidence of the introduction of a predominantly comprehensive system to Old Northwick with the rationalisation necessitated by falling rolls contrasted with the experience of most LEAs where low pupil numbers had to be accommodated within an already transformed system. Thus, the use of parental choice as an instrument to close unpopular comprehensive schools was never on the agenda, as was the case in many other parts of the country. The main issue for public debate in Northwick was the retention of selective schools. Comprehensives such as ONC10, ONC13 and ONC12 were newly built with excellent facilities and any threat of closure seemed extremely remote. Apart from ONC1, whose small intake differentiated it from the other schools, all the Old Northwick comprehensives were blessed with substantial local populations. Crucial to their success would be the loyalty of the parents and children in their catchments. The evolution of these catchments and the strength of the ties with the local schools is now considered.

This thesis investigates trends in pupil movement to out-of-catchment schools between 1991 and 1995. Unfortunately secondary transfer data are no longer available for previous years. Therefore the following account relies on the recollections of current and former LEA staff. Informants included the Education Officer who managed the educational

reorganisation in the 1980s and the current LEA officers respectively responsible for secondary transfer policy and administration. In the first half of the decade, in Old Northwick, catchments were fairly water-tight with the exception of children who secured places at selective or denominational schools who could travel considerable distances. There was some movement from secondary modern catchments to comprehensives (particularly NNC4, NNC3 and ONC4 which had spare places for most of the eighties) but the local school was normally the natural choice for parents not exercising the selective option. The first major increase in fluidity within the system occurred in the second half of the eighties when the growing unpopularity of ONC2 was reflected by a trend for parents to choose places in NNC1, NNC2 and RC1. Apart from this avoidance strategy, it is believed that parents' attitude to choice of secondary school did not fundamentally change in the 1980s. LEA staff of the late 1980s also maintain that any trends towards increased catchment permeability since 1991 represents an absolute increase in fluidity within the system rather than, for example, a reversion to a more normal state from an untypically low volume of out-of-catchment pupil movements.

Some mention should be made of the design of the catchment boundaries in the 1980's reorganisation. These were primarily drawn up on the basis of educational rather than socio-economic criteria. Catchments were chosen to provide a school population that matched the then currently perceived optimum size of over a thousand pupils for a comprehensive school (greater then than now). The post-war planning of Old Northwick had produced a series of neighbourhoods that were too small to support such schools on their own, so that many children now had to attend schools in an adjoining area. Thus, catchments were not designed to provide 'neighbourhood' schools with a socially homogeneous intake, nor was there any attempt to draw catchment boundaries that

‘engineered’ a socially mixed intake. The contrasting social character of the city’s secondary school catchments is illustrated in Figure 4.1. Only ONC2 and ONC4 have socially balanced catchments.

Irrespective of socio-economic factors, a certain amount of movement between catchments in Northwick is inevitable because of the disparity between catchment populations of year-6 pupils and the Planned Admissions Levels (PAL) for pupils in the local comprehensives. Figures 4.4 and 4.5 show the ratio between the PAL and year-6 population for each catchment. The large pupil surpluses in the Old Northwick catchments partly reflect their historical roots in the old two-tier system, with pupils exported to grammar as well as denominational schools. One important local demographic feature is the decline of the year-6 population in Old Northwick’s NNC4 requiring the school to import children if it is to survive. Its location on the edge of the city highlights the importance of another factor in the fluidity of pupil movements, namely transport.

Before considering transport, though, overall demographic change within Eastland is examined. As Table 4.1, demonstrates, the size of Eastland secondary school transfer cohorts within the study period, from 1991 to 1995, was relatively stable. However, this stability was temporary, interrupting a steady rise in the number of year 7 transfers that began in 1988/1989, was re-established in 1996-1998, and is forecast to continue until the middle of the next decade. Spare capacity within the secondary schools system during the study period was, then, fairly constant, though likely to fall in the following years, unless extra places were created.

Free school transport is only available to secondary school pupils in Eastland LEA if they meet the following criteria. First, they must live over three miles away from the secondary

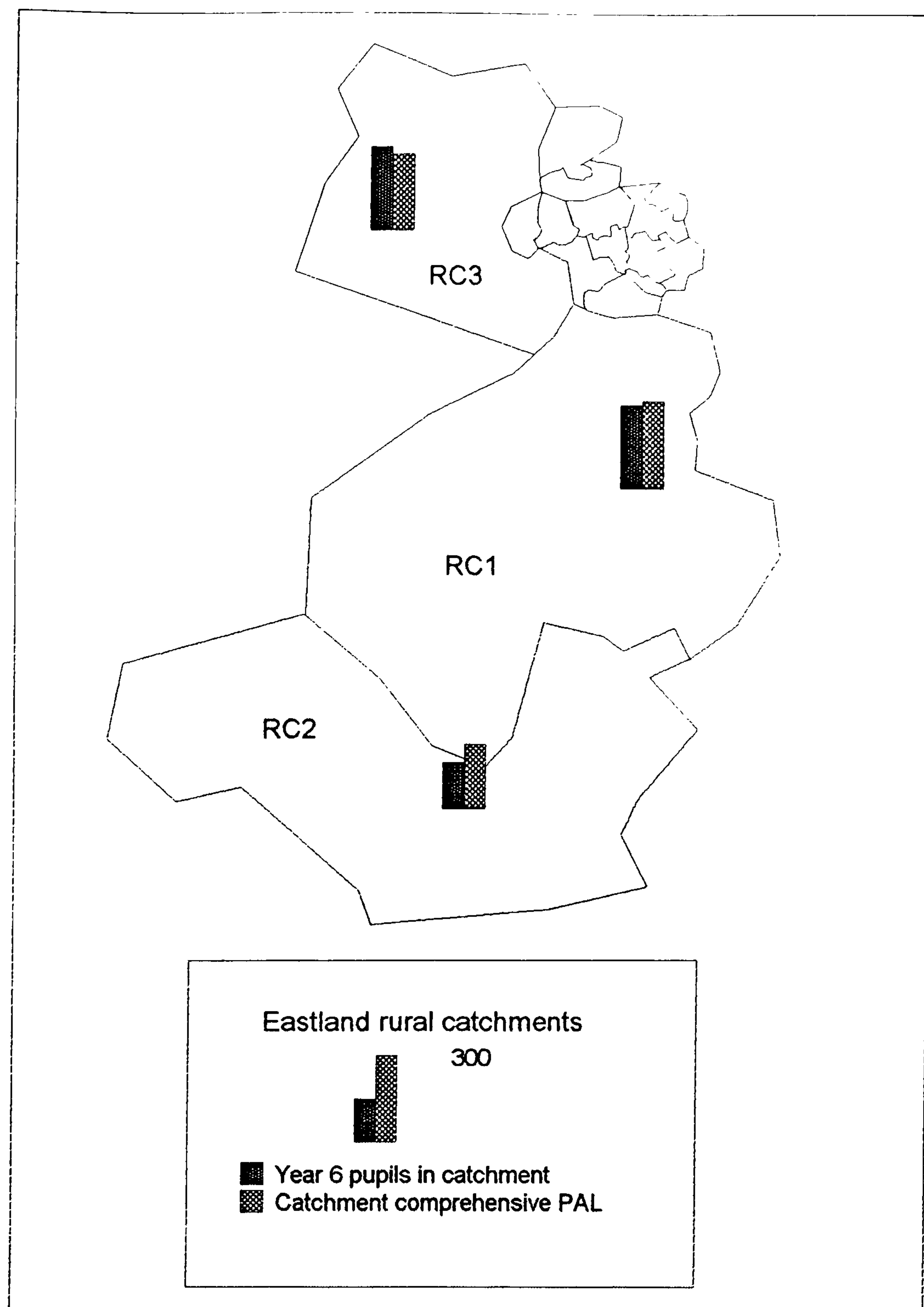


Figure 4.4 Eastland: rural catchment year-6 population and Planned Admissions Level for local comprehensive -1995

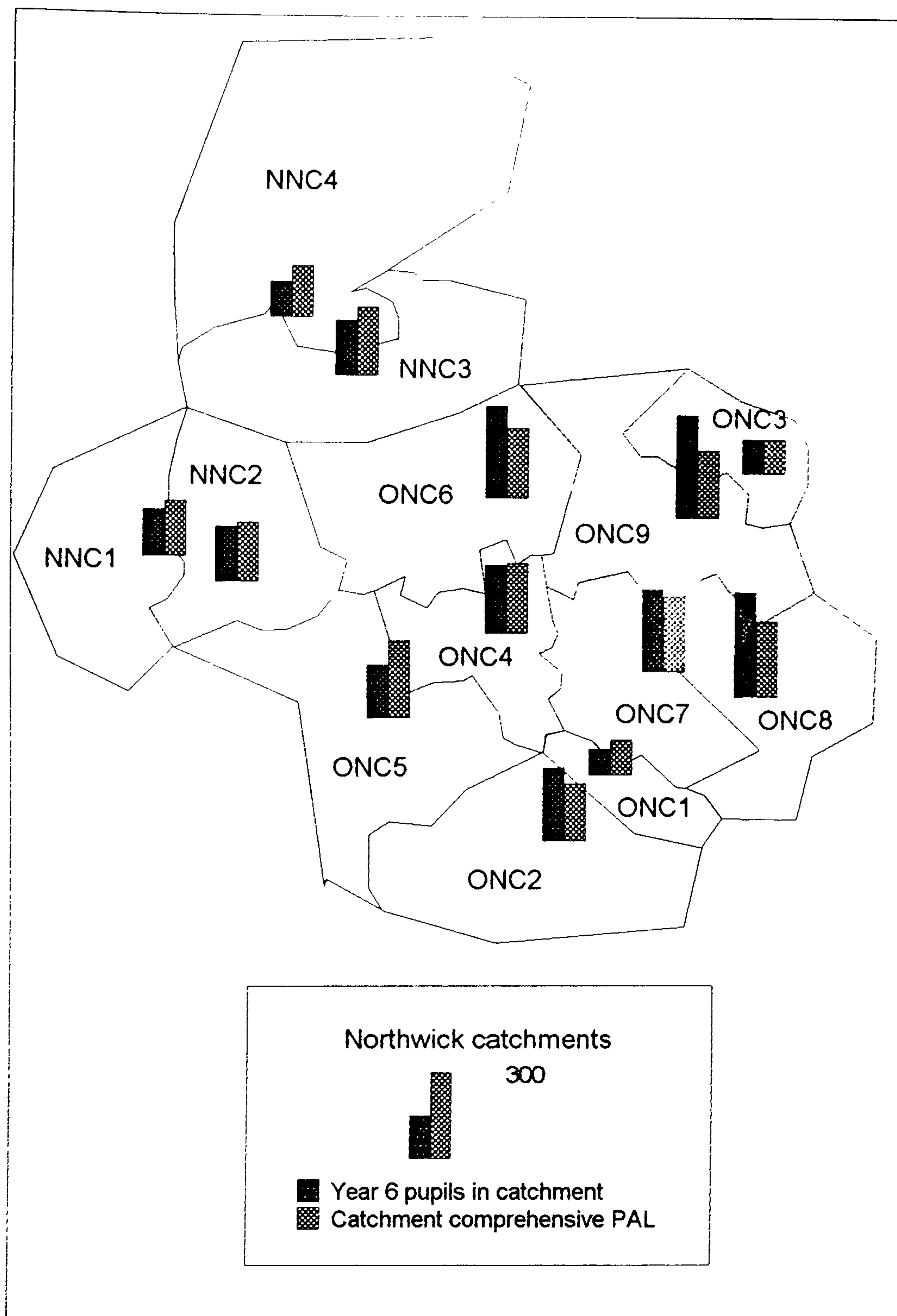


Figure 4.5 Northwick: catchment year-6 population and Planned Admissions Level for local comprehensive -1995

school. If the pupil attends a comprehensive school, it must be their local catchment school. Similarly, children who attend a grammar or denominational school are eligible for free school transport only if they satisfy the three-mile criterion and live within LEA-defined areas. In the case of the grammar schools Northwick's city boundary defines the designated area whilst for denominational schools it extends well into the rural hinterland (see Figure 4.6). Free transport is therefore likely to be an important factor in choice for poorer parents who send their children to grammar and denominational schools from outlying areas and a number of special bus services bring children to these schools. For pupils attending out-of-catchment comprehensive schools, on the other hand, public bus service availability is more important in making alternative schools accessible, as is the ability and willingness of parents to pay the fares. Some schools are becoming increasingly concerned about their relative inaccessibility by public transport, while others rely on bus and rail services to supply them with pupils.

Age	Pupils on register	Transfer year
15	3366	1988
14	3363	1989
13	3787	1990
12	3830	1991
11	3876	1992
10	3755	1993
9	3746	1994
8	3843	1995
7	3985	1996
6	4011	1997
5	4108	1998

Table 4.1 - Eastland pupil cohorts, 1992/1993

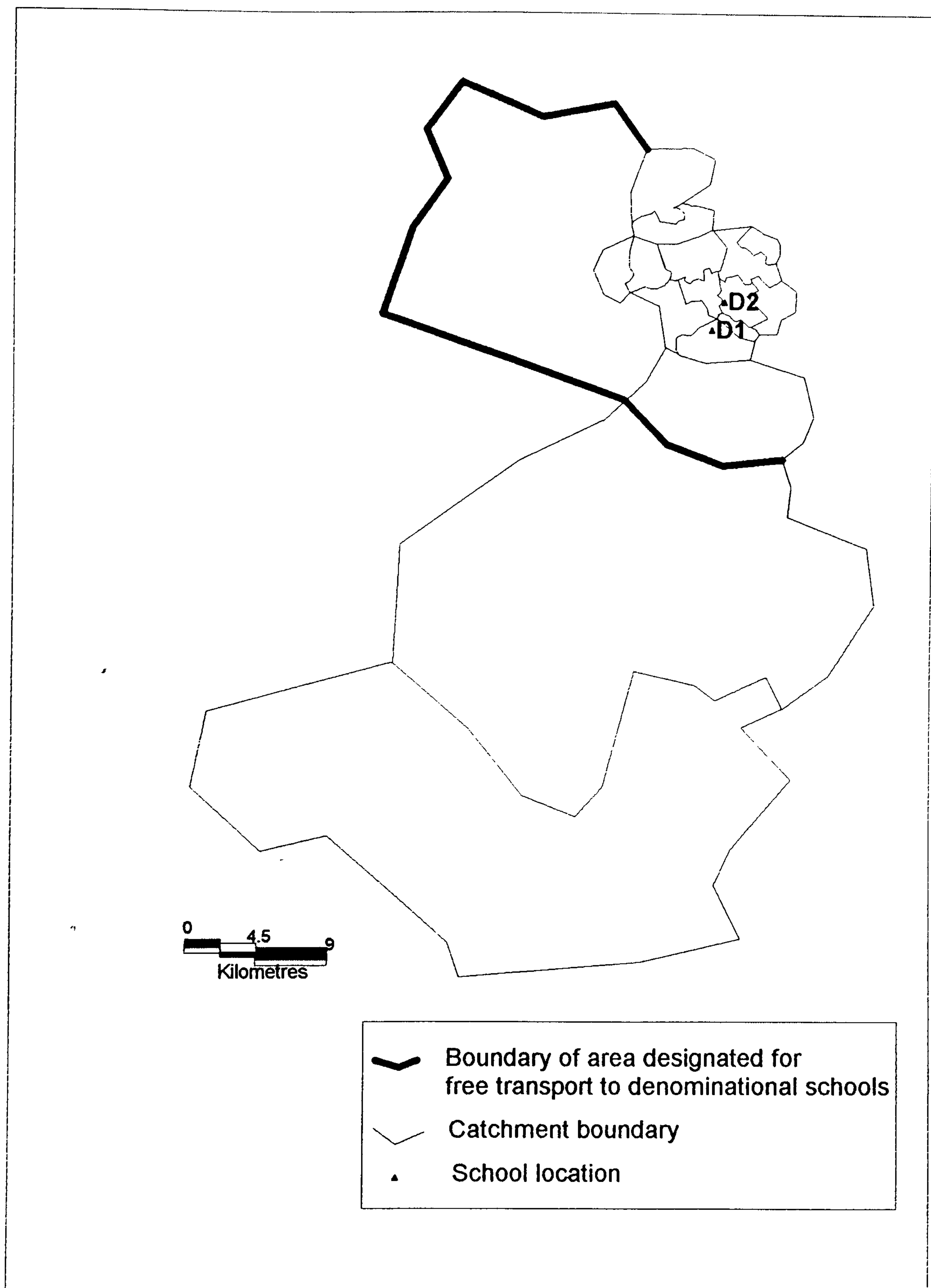


Figure 4.6 Area designated for free transport to denominational schools (provided pupils live over 3 miles from school)

The 1988 Education Reform Act was designed to facilitate vigorous competition between schools in an urban system such as Northwick's. Within the research period, however, mutual co-operation was much more noteworthy than aggressive marketing by any individual school. This state of affairs was undoubtedly reinforced by the almost total absence of defections to the grant-maintained sector. For many years D2 was the only grant maintained school in the system and even this school continued to participate fully in the LEA's admissions arrangements. Eastland Heads and the LEA still hold regular meetings through which, despite the stresses created by the co-existence of a comprehensive and selective system, a situation of 'dynamic tension' is maintained. On the whole, Heads have felt that there is more to be lost than gained from open competition, partly for reasons of self-interest, and partly for reasons of solidarity with less-favoured schools. The LEA plays the role of 'honest broker', attempting to ensure a level playing field, informing parents of their right to express a preference without favouring any one type of school. In this respect, Eastland does not correspond to the competitive ideal, free of LEA control or influence, envisaged by the Conservative policy makers, but it does resemble the model of a parental choice system operating through a common transfer procedure that will soon be required of all LEAs by the Labour Government (DfEE, 1998).

Of course, the two private schools in Old Northwick are not part of this co-operative system, but they provide less than 4% of secondary places in Northwick and, thus, play a lesser role than they do in rural secondary transfers. The exact nature of this role cannot be identified in this study, as the LEA could not supply private school pupil postcodes. It may be assumed, though, that the private schools recruit predominantly from the more affluent sections of the population and that, as with the grammar schools, a substantial number of pupils commute from the rural catchments.

4.5 Transfer procedures from primary to secondary school.

The specific secondary school transfer procedures operating in Eastland are now considered. The process has been substantially unchanged throughout the research period and is outlined in Table 4.2. The key document for parents is a 22 page guide to secondary school admissions produced in an easy to read style that contrasts with the more legalistic approach of some LEAs' brochures. The guide contains a timetable of secondary school open day/evenings, maps displaying Northwick secondary school catchment boundaries, selection criteria in the event of over-subscription and a form on which parents express their first preference of school (and no other preference). Since 1994, at the request of school NNC4 in particular, a summary of bus routes serving each school is also provided to parents. There was considerable, sometimes heated, debate about this innovation, reflecting the sensitivity of Heads to anything that might upset their competitive position.

Date	Process
Summer Term	Guide to secondary school transfer process issued to parents of all Year 5 pupils.
Late September	Open days/evenings held at secondary schools
End of October	Final date for submission of parents' first preference.
Late November /early December	Three 11-plus examinations are sat by children applying to grammar schools.
End of Autumn term	LEA informs the parents of children whose first preference is a comprehensive school if a place is available. Unsuccessful parents are asked for second preference.
Mid-March	11-plus results become available. Unsuccessful parents are asked for second preference. All parents whose children did not obtain a place at their first preference school are offered a place at an alternative, ideally their second preference.
Late March onwards	Automatic reviews, if requested, of parents whose second preference is not satisfied. Appeals by parents who are still not satisfied.

Table 4.2 - Secondary school transfer timetable

The method used to resolve the over-subscription of schools is a potentially important factor in the determination of the final pattern of pupil movements. The full criteria for deciding which pupils are accepted in these circumstances are therefore outlined here:

Comprehensive schools.

Priority is allocated in the following order:

1. children living in the school's catchment area with a sibling who will be attending the school at the time of admission;
2. children living in the catchment area, no sibling, but attending a feeder primary school;
3. children living in the catchment area, no sibling and not attending a feeder primary school;
4. children living outside the catchment area with sibling who will be attending the school at the time of admission;
5. other children living outside the catchment area and attending a feeder primary school;
6. other children living outside the catchment area. Decisions between children in this category, if necessary, to be made on the basis of distance between home and school measured by the shortest available walking route.

Thus, in most cases, priority is decided by whether a child lives in a particular catchment, and, if they do not, on how far the child lives from the desired school. Parents are effectively guaranteed a place if they make the local comprehensive their first preference. For any other choice, they must take the popularity and proximity of the school into account. If they gamble on gaining a place at a popular comprehensive outside their local catchment, they must consider the possibility that the local school may be over-subscribed

when the second round of preference satisfaction takes place.

Grammar schools.

There are two all-girl grammar schools and one for boys only. Entrance to any of them is solely through success in the 11-plus, which is open to all year-6 children, even those living outside the LEA boundaries. Every child whose score in the 11-plus examination places them in the top 25% of the national ability range is guaranteed a place at one of the grammar schools. If preferences for either of the two girls' grammar schools are disproportionate, then those scoring least are allocated to the less popular school. Again, the child who takes the 11-plus risks their local comprehensive being over-subscribed should they be unsuccessful.

Denominational schools.

The criteria deciding which pupils are admitted when either of the two Roman Catholic schools are over-subscribed may be summarised as:

- Baptised Catholics;
- Baptised children of other religions supported by a letter from a minister of religion;
- For the girls' school only, children who are able to accept the ethos and spirit of the school may be considered if there are special circumstances.

For both schools, if there has to be further differentiation within any of these categories, the final decision will be made on the basis of the distance the child lives from the school. The schools themselves are responsible for their own admissions. However, the schools' full participation in the LEA transfer procedure means that parents potentially face the

same problem as those who failed to secure their first preference for a comprehensive or grammar school. If there are no places left at the local comprehensive after the first round of preference satisfaction, their child may have to travel some distance to a less desirable alternative. This is the key dilemma for many parents considering an out-of-catchment school.

4.6 The progression from pilot study to the current research.

Now that the case-study area has been described, the outcome of the pilot study can be summarised. This research linked 1991 pupil data supplied by the LEA to a digitised map of comprehensive school catchments in an investigation of the extent to which pupils were transferring to secondary schools outside the local catchment and the determination of any patterns in these pupil flows. The pupil data included first choice secondary school, secondary school actually attended, primary school attended, whether the 11-plus was taken or passed, and the home postcode defining home location. Some very interesting results were revealed.

Degree of satisfaction.

90% of pupils gained their first choice school (98% of comprehensive applicants, 95% of denominational school applicants, 46.5% of grammar school applicants). 11-plus failures were clearly the most likely to be required to make a second preference. The geographical variation in the percentage of grammar school applicants who failed the 11-plus suggested that weaker applicants might be deterred from taking the examination when their local comprehensive was seen as an acceptable fallback. The apparently high degree of satisfaction for those who apply to a local comprehensive could mask a significant number of parents who express a 'safe' preference for a reasonable local comprehensive rather than

risk the consequences of failing to get a place at a more attractive comprehensive elsewhere. On both points, further research was seen as desirable.

Patterns of pupil movement - overview.

In September 1991, 18% of year-seven pupils went to an out-of-catchment comprehensive, 6% to a grammar school and 6% to a denominational school. At the scale of the individual comprehensive, three features of pupil movement stood out. First, the scale of differences in the outflows from catchments (1-50%). Second, the very limited extent of movement in the rural areas, presumably dictated by the isolation of the rural comprehensives. Third, the lower level of out-of-catchment movement in New Northwick compared with Old Northwick. Again, further research was deemed desirable to identify the underlying causal factors behind these patterns. In particular, the importance of mismatches between school capacities and catchment population was considered an important point to investigate. Above all, it was stated that any future study should provide a longitudinal view so that long-term trends could be distinguished from stochastic variation or static patterns. In other words, it should determine whether the government's educational legislation was leading to a lasting change in patterns of pupil movement.

School type and pupil movement.

Comprehensive schools obtained about 80% of their intake from their own catchment, but, again, there was considerable variation. Rural catchments only imported about 5% of their pupils in contrast to a range of 9-43% for Northwick comprehensives. There was a bimodal distribution of schools, in respect of their losses to other schools, with one group 'leaking' less than 7% of their potential pupils compared with another group of high-loss catchments, mostly in Old Northwick, where 20-30% of pupils ended up at other

comprehensives. However, this was not a simple split between successful schools with intakes from predominantly higher status groups on the one hand and 'sink' schools in deprived neighbourhoods on the other. The lack of a clear inverse relationship between catchment losses and gains suggested a more complex decision-making process on the part of parents and their children. A competitive market of rational consumers would be unlikely to produce such a pattern of flows between catchments unless parents were using different criteria in their choice of schools. It was hypothesised that some parents might place a higher premium on academic considerations, whilst others were governed by more pragmatic factors such as convenience.

Old Northwick catchments were found to make a much greater contribution to grammar school intakes than New Northwick. The elucidation of possible explanations such as travel considerations and allegiances to local comprehensives again required further research. Analysis of denominational schools intakes revealed a similar pattern, although this may have been complicated by the importance of Catholic feeder primary schools in supplying their secondary counterparts.

In summary, the pilot study found that geographical catchments were still playing a significant role in pupil destinations. Predictability of future movements would aid future planning and numbers forecasting, besides assisting the evaluation of the ability to maintain educational continuity through primary/secondary school links. It was therefore important to monitor patterns of choice on an annual basis. The pilot project demonstrated the ability to achieve this to a high degree of precision. However, the stability of the patterns of pupil flows that the study identified and the motivation of the parents that underlay these flows were far from clear. Any further research should analyse data longitudinally and the decision-making processes of parents should be explored so that a

human context could be provided for the geographical patterns revealed by the GIS analysis.

Chapter 5. GIS Methodology

5.1 Introduction

Chapter Three revealed how the literature on choice of secondary school has demonstrated the consistent importance of geography in the parental decision making process. However, there has been insufficient exploration and analysis of the geographic component of the choice system. In particular, the shortage of empirical research on the extent to which catchments remain relevant to schools and parents was noted. This gap in the literature was attributed, at least partly, to the unfamiliarity of ‘mainstream’ educational researchers with the technique most suited to such analysis, namely Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

In this chapter GIS is defined and its increasing use in other academic fields is illustrated. In particular, examples of the contribution of GIS to areas of health care research analogous to the concerns of the author in the educational field are outlined to emphasise the applicability of this technique. The background to the provision of the secondary school pupil transfer data by the LEA is described, together with an overview of the data content and the constraints placed upon their use. Postcodes are crucially important to this research as a means of providing spatial references for pupils and schools and there is a short description of their usage and limitations. The structure of the GIS, together with the processes involved in setting it up, is outlined. Chapter Three contained a set of objectives arising from the research aims. The use of GIS methods to achieve some of these research objectives is described. Finally, the limitations of GIS, in the context of this research, and the need for additional methods of investigation are briefly discussed.

5.2 GIS as a research tool

There are many definitions of GIS (a generic term) but a useful one is “A system for capturing, storing, checking, integrating, analysing and displaying data which are spatially

referenced to the earth. This is normally considered to involve a spatially-referenced computer database and appropriate applications software.” (Department of the Environment, 1987: 132). The single most powerful function of a GIS is the capacity to relate spatially distributed phenomena with non-spatial or attribute data (Peuquet, 1984).

A GIS generally consists of a number of standard components defined by Burrough and McDonnell (1998) as follows:

- (a) Data input and verification
- (b) Database storage and database management
- (c) Data and output and presentation
- (d) Data transformation
- (e) Interaction with the user

Data input covers a range of techniques for transforming geographical data into a suitable digital form. These include manual digitising of maps, scanning of remotely sensed images, keyboard input of text data and translation of data already in a digital format.

Data storage is concerned with the way geographical elements are represented within the computer system. These elements are of three types: *points*, *lines* and *polygons*, all of which describe objects on the earth’s surface. These three elements are described in three ways: *position* (within the real world and/or the computer model), *topology*, describing their linkages with each other and *attributes*, associating other information with the elements (Burrough and McDonnell, 1998). The data are generally stored in some sort of Database Management System (DBMS) whereby the linkages and attributes can be stored, transformed and interrogated in a structured manner. In the ARC/INFO system used in the author’s research, a specific set of points, lines, polygons and attributes is called a

coverage. Thus there may be a coverage comprising a road network, a set of points indicating home addresses or the boundaries of a group of administrative areas.

Outputs from a GIS may be in the form of displays on a screen, printer or plotter. Equally, they may comprise tables of data, new computer files or simple statistics. An analytical and visual display technique of particular use in GIS is that of overlaying different coverages. An example in the author's research consists of three overlaid coverages. The home locations of all the pupils attending a particular school are overlaid on a coverage containing the catchment boundaries of all the schools in the system and another coverage containing the locations of the secondary schools. This would quickly illustrate which catchments, other than the home catchment, were supplying pupils to a particular school. The addition of an overlay of main transport routes in the area might indicate if train or bus services were influencing out-of-catchment flows.

The most important types of data transformation are those that can provide the answers to spatial questions. These are generally transparent to the user, but many are only possible in a GIS because of the combination of the topologically structured database and association of attributes with its individual elements. Examples of such questions are:

- (a) Where is object A?
- (b) Where is A in relation to place B?
- (c) What is the value of function Z at position X?
- (d) What is the result of intersecting various kinds of spatial data?
- (e) What is the path of least distance along the ground from X to Y along pathway P?
- (f) What objects are next to objects having certain combinations of attributes? from
Burrough and McDonnell (1998, 9)

These types of question are precisely the ones that need to be answered in research into the relationship between school choice and secondary school catchments. For example, GIS

analysis of the extent to which children are travelling longer distances to school requires that the home to school journey is measured for thousands of pupils, either as the crow flies or by main transport routes. Any trend in children attending schools outside their designated catchment can be measured in a GIS by overlaying catchment boundaries with pupils' home locations for successive years' intakes.

Much of the recent surge in the use of GIS may be attributable to the power and storage capacity of computers allowing large data sets from different sources to be stored, transformed, integrated, analysed and displayed with relative ease. This is a crucial requirement when large volumes of administrative data need to be analysed, as in this research where the annual overall pupil cohort for the case study area exceeds 4,000. In addition, the falling costs of GIS, together with a rise in the user-friendliness of the software, have considerably enhanced the attraction of GIS as a general-purpose research tool.

A further factor in the expansion of GIS usage is the growing availability of topographic and socio-economic data in digital format that can be easily imported into a GIS. Indeed, the Chorley Committee on Handling Geographic Information (DoE, 1987) saw take-up of GIS as dependent on the extent to which data collectors and data holders can be persuaded to provide data in digital format.

The growth and increasing capabilities of GIS are well charted by a number of authors; Cassetari (1993), Maguire et al (1991), Martin (1996), Worrall (1990, 1991), Jones (1997), Burroughs and McDonnell (1998) and Heywood *et al* (1998) provide useful overviews. Apart from academic research, GIS has been most successfully integrated into the fields of environmental and utility management and some areas of local government. Elsewhere the move from *potential* applications to applied analysis is generally in its early stages, but the

evidence is that this transition is gaining momentum (Longley and Clarke, 1995). In 1994 it was revealed that over two-thirds of all GIS then installed had been in use for less than four years (Pritchard, 1994), confirmation of the youth of the technology.

Successful applications of GIS are widespread. Hirschfield *et al* (1995) developed a GIS-based crime analysis and mapping system. This provides a convenient means of highlighting patterns in crime statistics and identifying the socio-demographic characteristics of areas with high levels of criminal activity. In medical research, GIS-based statistical methods have been developed to help identify spatial clustering of diseases such as leukaemia (Openshaw *et al*, 1987). Emergency response to the US Midwest floods of 1993 was considerably helped by the use of GIS to list the phone numbers of all properties below a certain contour line (Rheingold 1994). This handful of GIS applications selected from thousands world-wide gives some idea of the suitability of such systems in a variety of fields. The question remains: to what extent is GIS an appropriate tool in the study of the dynamics of secondary school catchments?

Several academic studies have examined the potential of GIS in this area. A prototype GIS was developed in Scotland to illustrate the possible contribution of GIS to educational management (Garner *et al*, 1990). Here, school catchment boundaries were overlaid by pupils' home postcodes in order to examine the difference between *de jure* and *de facto* catchments in a similar way to this study. Clarke and Langley (1996) reviewed the potential for the application of GIS spatial-modelling techniques in the context of educational planning. Most recently Higgs *et al* (1997b), having identified the neglect of spatial aspects of parental choice by educational researchers, proposed a future research agenda for future parental choice studies using GIS methods. In particular, they recommend the examination of longitudinal change in differences between *de facto* and *de jure* secondary school

catchments as an excellent way of measuring the impact of parental choice. That, of course, is the method proposed by Garner *et al* (1990) and used in this study.

There has been only limited practical use made of GIS in educational research. It is used more extensively by LEAs in educational management, although on a much smaller scale than in other areas of local government such as planning and environmental management. Lothian LEA has implemented a GIS system to filter applications for school places according to geographic criteria, to calculate home-to-school distances for over 95,000 primary and secondary school children and to analyse population, transportation and other long-term trends (Ireland, 1995). A pilot project in Bedfordshire LEA examined the potential of GIS to improve decision-making by educational managers (Jones & Vann, 1995). However, comprehensive educational GIS applications are still rare and it is easier to illustrate the value of GIS in this research with several examples from the field of health care. GIS has already made a significant impact in this area where the socio-spatial structures analysed have some commonality with those found in school choice systems. For example, doctors' practices or hospitals are nodes that provide a service to customers who are not necessarily spatially contiguous, in the same way that schools serve pupils who are not limited to the local school. There will be socio-economic variation, which can be characterised spatially, in the way that the service is used or viewed by these customers. Transport availability may be crucial in the accessibility of these services. Here, then, are some examples drawn from the health field.

Todd *et al* (1994) examined general practitioners' provision of community health, combining postcoded patient records, census derived socio-economic data, morbidity data and road networks in a GIS that allowed health planners to evaluate the effectiveness of the delivery of specific health programmes to different communities. In another study (Bullen *et al*, 1994) the objective was to identify the extent and characteristics of local community

boundaries in order to improve the delivery of local health care. Community maps were created by overlaying different types of spatially referenced data such as local authority boundaries, socio-economic profiles and local people's perceptions of neighbourhood extent. Finally, GIS methods were used to view Walsall's health services at different scales, such as District Health Authority area boundaries and individual GPs' catchment areas (Wain, 1993). The study used a variety of data sets. These included demographic data recording age, gender, class and deprivation, and health data on mortality and morbidity. The various datasets were integrated to provide area-by-area profiles of the characteristics and needs of each neighbourhood or catchment. These examples of contemporary GIS usage in health-care research show that the employment of GIS to investigate the movements of pupils in relation to school catchments may be considered very much a mainstream application of the technology.

5.3 Background to the use of GIS in the case study.

Successful application of GIS depends on the availability of suitable geographically referenced data. Since 1991, the case study LEA has, as part of its secondary school transfer system, maintained a database containing a record for each year-6 pupil in the area. The database is held on a desktop computer in dBase IV format. Each pupil record contains, amongst other items, the child's home postcode, the first choice secondary school and the school that they eventually attend. It was the availability of this information, in a format that was easily transferable for analysis on other computers, that encouraged the setting up of a pilot project in the case study area.

A subset of the pupil data for 1991, excluding (to fulfil the provisions of the Data Protection Act) sensitive information such as parents' names and full address, was provided to the University for the pilot study. The data were analysed using dBase IV database software and the GIMMS computer-mapping package in an investigation of the

flows of pupils between the different urban catchments. The results of this pilot study have been summarised in Chapter Four. This analysis formed a partial model for the much larger GIS analysis in this research.

Following the success of the pilot study, the LEA agreed to make available the pupil secondary transfer files for 1993, 1994 and 1995 in addition to the original 1991 data. The 1992 file had been deleted from the database and was thus unavailable for analysis. The availability of data on sequential cohorts made possible an investigation of temporal trends in patterns of school intake as opposed to the pilot study's 'snapshot' of 1991 movements. Again, for Data Protection Act purposes, confidential information was removed before the files were transferred to the author from the LEA. The major limitation of this data was the previously mentioned absence of transfers to private school. Assuming (almost certainly incorrectly) that the supply of private school places reflects the demand locally for such education, then about 4% of Northwick transfers and 10% of rural Eastland transfers are absent.

The previously stated objectives of this study include: the identification of trends in the number of pupils going to a secondary school other than that of the local catchment comprehensive, the examination of any spatial or socio-economic variation in patterns of pupil flow across catchment boundaries, and a holistic consideration of the overall dynamics of pupil flow across the system. In order to investigate these topics using a GIS, it was necessary to convert the catchment boundaries, the secondary school locations and the pupils' home locations to a common geographical referencing system. This was made possible by the use of the Ordnance Survey National Grid Reference system. Designated area boundaries can be converted into sequences of grid references by digitising them from maps and transforming the co-ordinates contained in the resultant GIS file. School and pupil home locations can be converted from postcode to grid reference using the standard

look-up tables. The crucial importance of postcodes in this GIS analysis requires a brief discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this method of spatial representation which is increasingly common in many areas of research.

5.4 Postcode use in GIS

The UK postcode is “a summary of an address in a form which can be read by computer and thus enables mail to be sorted automatically” (Raper *et al*, 1992). The postcode is constructed hierarchically with the sequence of alphabetic and numeric components representing areas of diminishing size. The first half of the postcode represents the Area and District (e.g. SO4 represents District 4 in the Southampton postcode Area) whilst the second part consists of a single digit representing the Sector followed by two letters representing the lowest level, normally a group of houses. The following table illustrates this hierarchy:

Level in spatial hierarchy	Number of areal units in UK
Postcode Areas	120
Postcode Districts	2,679
Postcode Sectors	8,820
Postcodes (Residential only)	1,397,754
Residential delivery points	23,845,162

Table 5.1 - Postcode hierarchy

Source: Raper *et al*, 1992, 36

The full postcode represents a very fine level of spatial differentiation. The median number of individual addresses for a full postcode is 12. There are ten times as many postcodes as the next finest set of areal units suitable for this type of research, census enumeration districts (Raper *et al*, 1992). Thus, postcodes allow detailed spatial analyses to be performed through the use of a device that is familiar to and used by nearly every adult in the country. In this case study, the use of the pupil’s home postcode in the secondary

transfer database enables every child to be fixed spatially relative to both the school which their parents requested and that to which they were actually admitted.

Postcodes do permit a very fine degree of spatial representation but some caution is needed when using them in spatial analysis. Some mention should be made here of 'Address Point', an Ordnance Survey/Post Office database that overcomes many of the problems of spatial 'fuzziness' mentioned in this section. Address Point is intended to provide accurate National Grid References of 1 metre resolution for all addresses in the UK. It should be of immense value in providing an extremely flexible geographical framework for the 2001 Census (Openshaw, 1995). Output reporting areas could, theoretically, be user-defined. However, aside from the problem of the cost, for example, approximately £80,000 for all 430,000 addresses in Birmingham (Ordnance Survey, 1998), the problem of confidentiality would limit its value in applications such as the current research, a problem examined in Section 5.5.

In this research, the postcode is not a pinpoint geographic representation. The full postcode of the pupil's home is converted into a Grid Reference using the Post Office's Postzon look-up table. The effective level of resolution is to the nearest 100 metres. Added to this 'fuzziness', there are shortcomings in the accuracy of the Grid References. Gatrell (1989) in a study of postcodes in Cumbria found a mean error of 96m for properties with a standard deviation of 66m. The Post Office has improved accuracy since Gattrell's survey and errors in urban areas are likely to be smaller, though errors still remain. Nevertheless, care has to be taken when making statistical assumptions. In this study the attribution of pupils' homes to an incorrect secondary school catchment is the most significant error that is likely to result from such spatial inaccuracy.

Error can also be introduced through the use of the wrong postcode. This will either be due to the parent using the wrong postcode in the first place, or the LEA officer incorrectly entering it into the database. Errors that produce a non-local postcode are immediately flagged in the GIS, as there is no match in the Postzon look-up table. Errors of this type amount to approximately 2% in the present study and were resolved by liaising with the LEA and correcting the database entry. Reassurance that neither type of error was common was provided by a check made during the social survey of parents. Each of the parents interviewed (in 163 homes) was asked the name of the school catchment in which they lived. In every case this was the same catchment as that identified by the translation of their postcode to a grid reference. Such errors are, of course, much more likely near catchment boundaries, but they do not appear to be a major source of concern in this study. The postcodes of a few pupils in each year could not be satisfactorily translated to a grid reference. These represented less than 1% of pupils in any year and these records were excluded from the analysis after a check that this action would not introduce an obvious bias.

5.5 Data sensitivity.

One of the commonly perceived advantages of spatial analysis using GIS is the capability for displaying phenomena such as school attendance patterns against the physical reality of roads, neighbourhoods and natural boundaries. This geographical specificity becomes less useful when questions of confidentiality arise. As stated in the first chapter of this thesis, the LEA and secondary school heads made their co-operation in the research conditional on individual schools being unidentifiable in any published research. This restriction not only requires the anonymity of schools in any discussion but also prevents presentation to the public of findings in any conventional cartographic representation, as individual schools would be easily identified. Thus, any maps to be seen by a wider readership require some

form of generalisation and/or topological distortion. This is achieved in the present research by three methods: smoothing and generalising catchment boundaries, transforming the co-ordinates of all spatial data objects so that the normal spatial orientation is absent, and the removal of physical features such as rivers.

Although maps for publication were necessarily altered in this fashion, the production of 'realistic' GIS maps of pupil flows was an important contribution to the overall analysis. Visualisation of pupil-flows, and knowledge of the relationship between the individual school and its physical and socio-spatial environment, were considerable aids to the understanding of the overall operation of the school choice system. Furthermore, it was acceptable to all concerned for the LEA to have access to 'unexpurgated' GIS outputs where no attempt was made to hide school identities. As the pupil data were only available to the author because of the goodwill of the LEA, the 'raw' analysis of pupil flows was something that could be provided to the Authority as a *quid pro quo*.

5.6 Choice of hardware and software environment for analysis.

A combination of practicality and the need for a system that allowed considerable flexibility dictated the choice of hardware and software environment for the GIS analysis. This flexibility was important, for though the broad hypotheses concerning the relation of pupils to catchments were known, it was anticipated that new lines of inquiry would suggest themselves. Additionally, there would be a subsequent need to link in the results of the social survey and to relate Census derived socio-economic data to pupil movements as well.

The GIS software chosen was ARC/INFO. It is easily the most common GIS used for serious research in the UK academic community, partly because of the availability of software through a special discount agreement arranged through the Combined Higher

Education Software Team (CHEST). This package was available on both a Sun workstation and IBM compatible PCs and supplied all the functionality required for the analysis. Whilst ARC/INFO provides a sophisticated relational database, its complexity meant that a simpler programme might be more suitable for undertaking basic analysis. Accordingly, the Microsoft Access database package was chosen as the primary data storage and analysis medium.

This database software, running on IBM compatible PC platforms, offers three main advantages. First, it is a fully relational database. This means that information in one file or table of data can be easily linked to other files through the use of common data fields. An example is given in Figure 5.1. Second, relational databases allow considerable flexibility in interrogating the data. For example, using the files illustrated in Figure 5.1, the school category field in the secondary school table, can be used to create a report on the number of pupils who attend 'rural' or 'urban' schools. Figure 5.2 shows the query and Figure 5.3 the output from the query. As Figure 5.2 illustrates, Access, a Microsoft Windows program, provides a relatively user-friendly environment in which to work. Provided that the database structure has been well designed in the first place, sophisticated queries and outputs can be quickly produced. The third notable feature is the ease with which data can be exchanged with other software. In particular, the output from data queries can be directly loaded into the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further analysis and/or graphing. It is also simple to transfer data to the ARC/INFO database.

ARC/INFO was used on both the PC and the Sun workstation platforms. The Sun provided a much easier to use working environment and better graphic display facilities than the PC version of the GIS software. However, the first use of ARC/INFO was for the analysis of pupil movements in relation to catchment boundaries. Given the sensitivity of the schools to publication of identifiable outputs, sophisticated and powerful capabilities were deemed

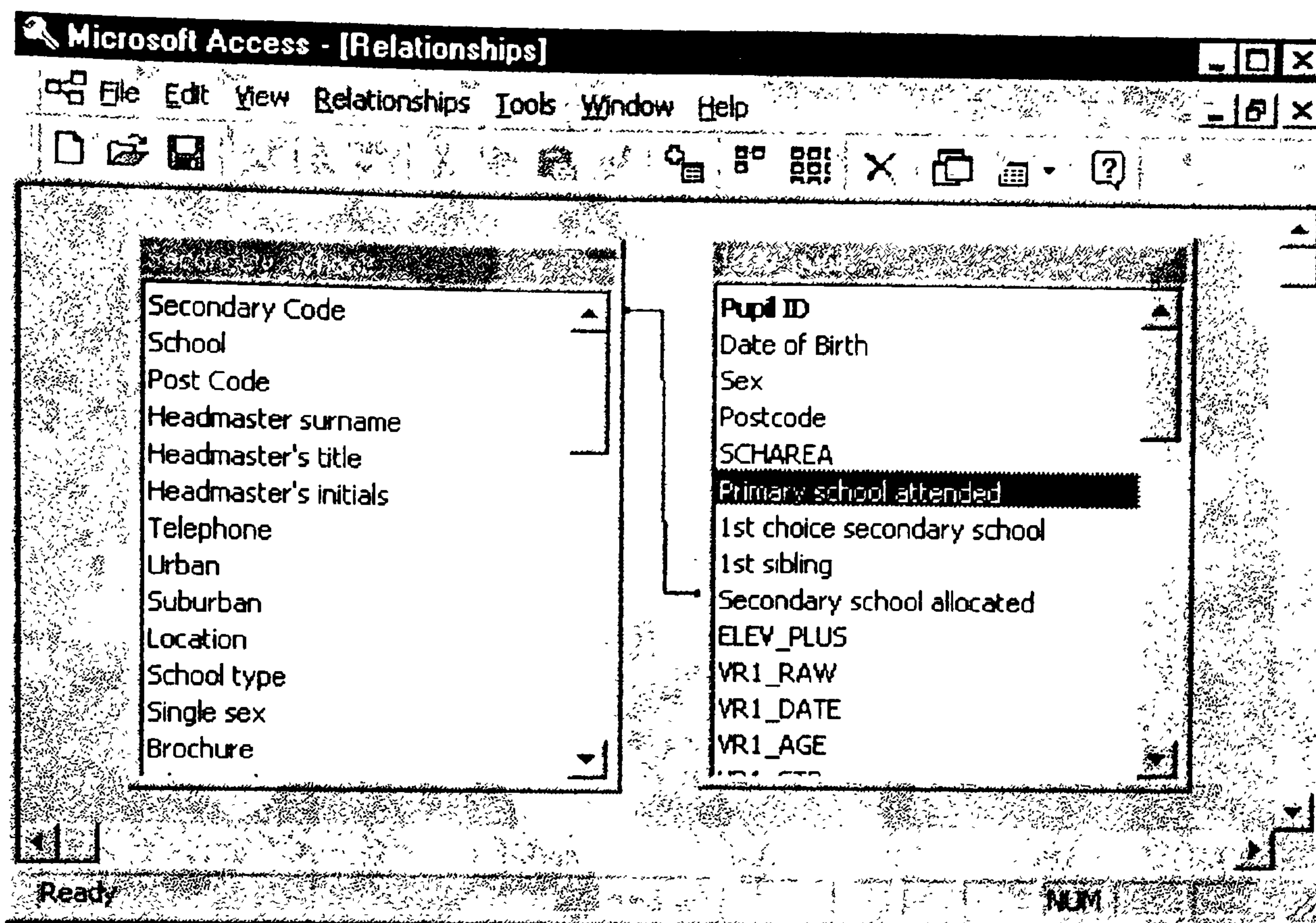


Figure 5.1 Linkage of two tables by common data field

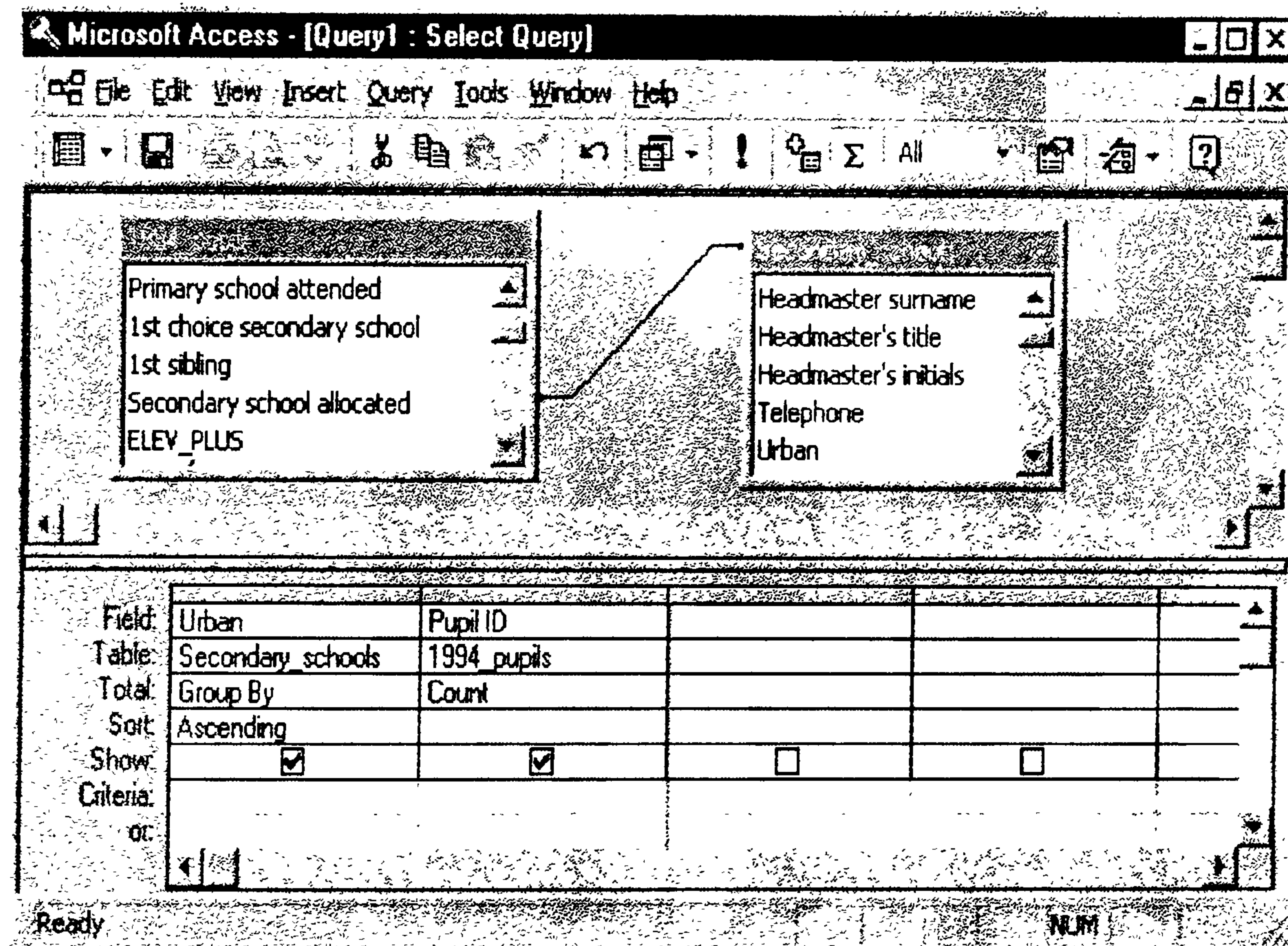


Figure 5.2 Query on number of pupils allocated to urban or rural schools

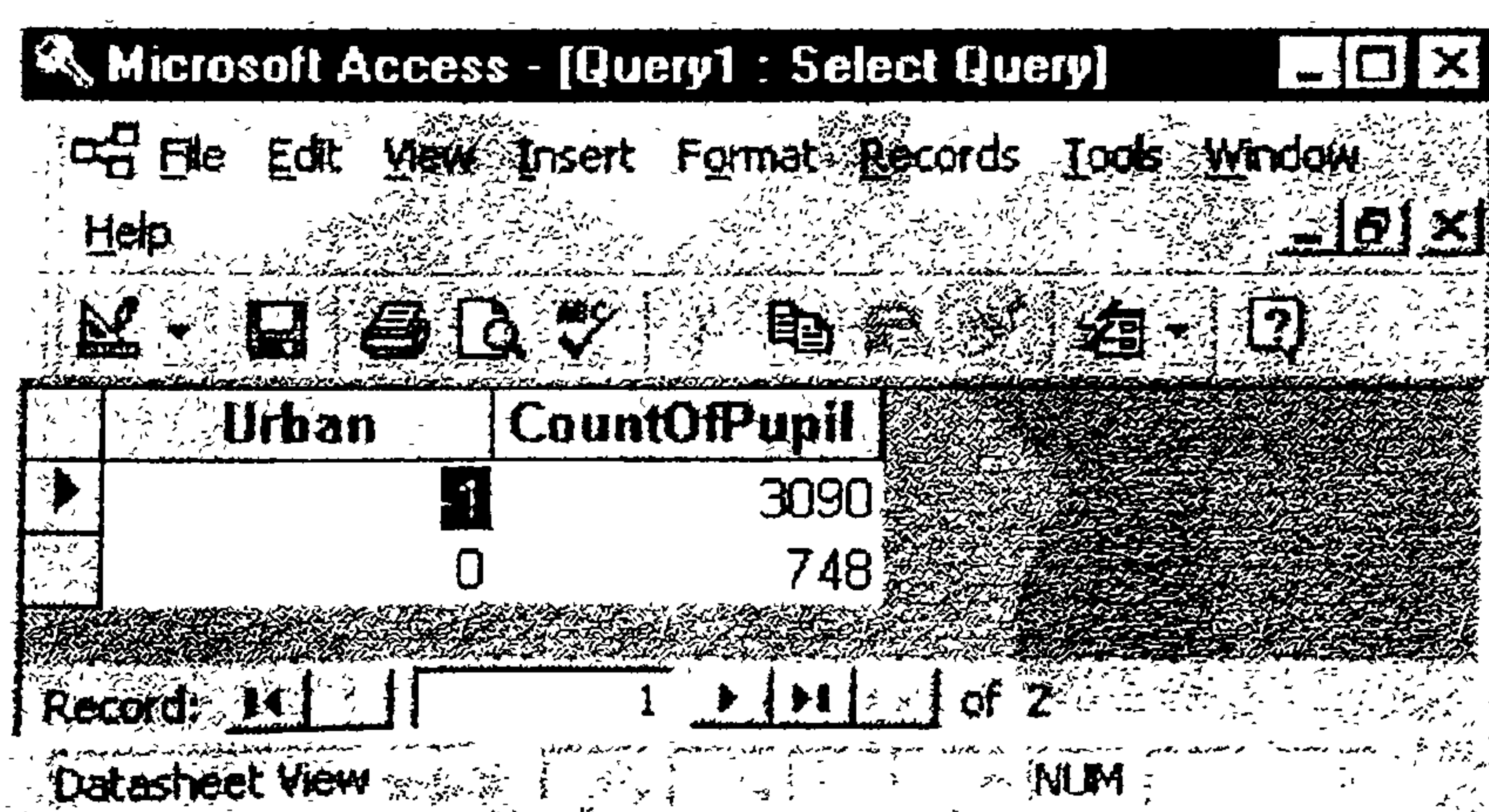


Figure 5.3 Result of query (-1 = urban, 0 = rural)

much less important than the ability to easily import data from the Access database, carry out spatial analysis, then return the results to Access or Excel for storage or display. The greater display functionality of the Sun system was used later for the production of maps, both on-screen and hard copy. The maps contained in this thesis, however, were produced using the Mapinfo mapping package, as this software was much more easily accessible at this stage of thesis production.

5.7 Process of data input

Table 5.2 illustrates the structure of the pupil transfer data file, as received from the LEA.

On receipt from the LEA, the pupil file for each year was read into the Access database, the format automatically converted from dBase IV to Access. A different database table was created for each pupil cohort. Missing postcodes and any other discrepancies in the data were identified and queried with the LEA. These amounted to about a hundred records from four thousand for each year. Less than 10 were unresolved for each year and these were left out of the analysis. A table was also set up within the Access database containing all secondary schools within the LEA area. Selected contents of this file are displayed in

Table 5.3

Field name	Description
Pupil id	Unique numeric identifier for each year-6 pupil in LEA area. Range approx. 1-4500
Date of birth	Pupil's date of birth
Gender	Pupil's gender
Postcode	Pupil's home postcode
Primary school attended	'DfEE number' of primary school attended. There are special codes for children from outside the LEA boundary or from private schools.
1 st choice secondary school	'DfEE number' of parents' first choice secondary school
Sibling	'DfEE number' of secondary school attended by sibling (up to three may be recorded)
Secondary school attended	'DfEE number' of secondary school pupil finally attends
Eleven plus	Indicates whether 11 plus taken
Eleven plus result	Total scored in 11 plus tests
Appeal	Parents appealed against school allocated by LEA
Appeal result	Result of appeal

Table 5.2 Pupil records as provided by LEA

Field name	Description
School code	'DfEE number' of secondary school
School	School name
Thesis code	'anonymous' school name used in publications
Postcode	School postcode
Urban	Indicates whether school serves urban or rural catchment
Suburban	Indicates whether school serves New Northwick catchment
School type	Indicates whether school is grammar, denominational or comprehensive
Single sex	Indicates whether school is co-educational
1991 PAL	Planned admission limit for 1991/2 year 7
1993 PAL	Planned admission limit for 1993/4 year 7
1994 PAL	Planned admission limit for 1994/5 year 7
1995 PAL	Planned admission limit for 1995/6 year 7
Townsend catchment decile	Indicator of socio-economic characteristics of catchment
Townsend intake decile	Indicator of socio-economic characteristics of school intake

Table 5.3 - Selected secondary school database table fields

The next stage of the construction of the database was the conversion of the postcodes of the pupils' homes and the schools into grid references so that they might be transferred to ARC/INFO and thus permit analysis on a standard spatial base. The Postzon file, a look-up table linking all Postcodes in the case study and surrounding area to their grid references, was read into the Access database. The Access 'update query' facility was used to create new tables as displayed in Figures 5.4 and 5.5.

The tables were exported from Access (in comma delimited format), then transferred to ARC/INFO. A point 'coverage' (a file constituting one data layer) was generated for each pupil cohort, 1991 to 1994 and later 1995, together with a coverage for the secondary schools. Thus, the grid reference for each pupil or school record could be displayed on the screen or hardcopy output in correct cartographic format and the attribute information linked to each record used in display (secondary school name, for instance) or as a means of selecting records for display. These coverages formed the basis for all subsequent GIS analysis, together with the catchment boundaries. In order to compare *de facto* and *de jure*

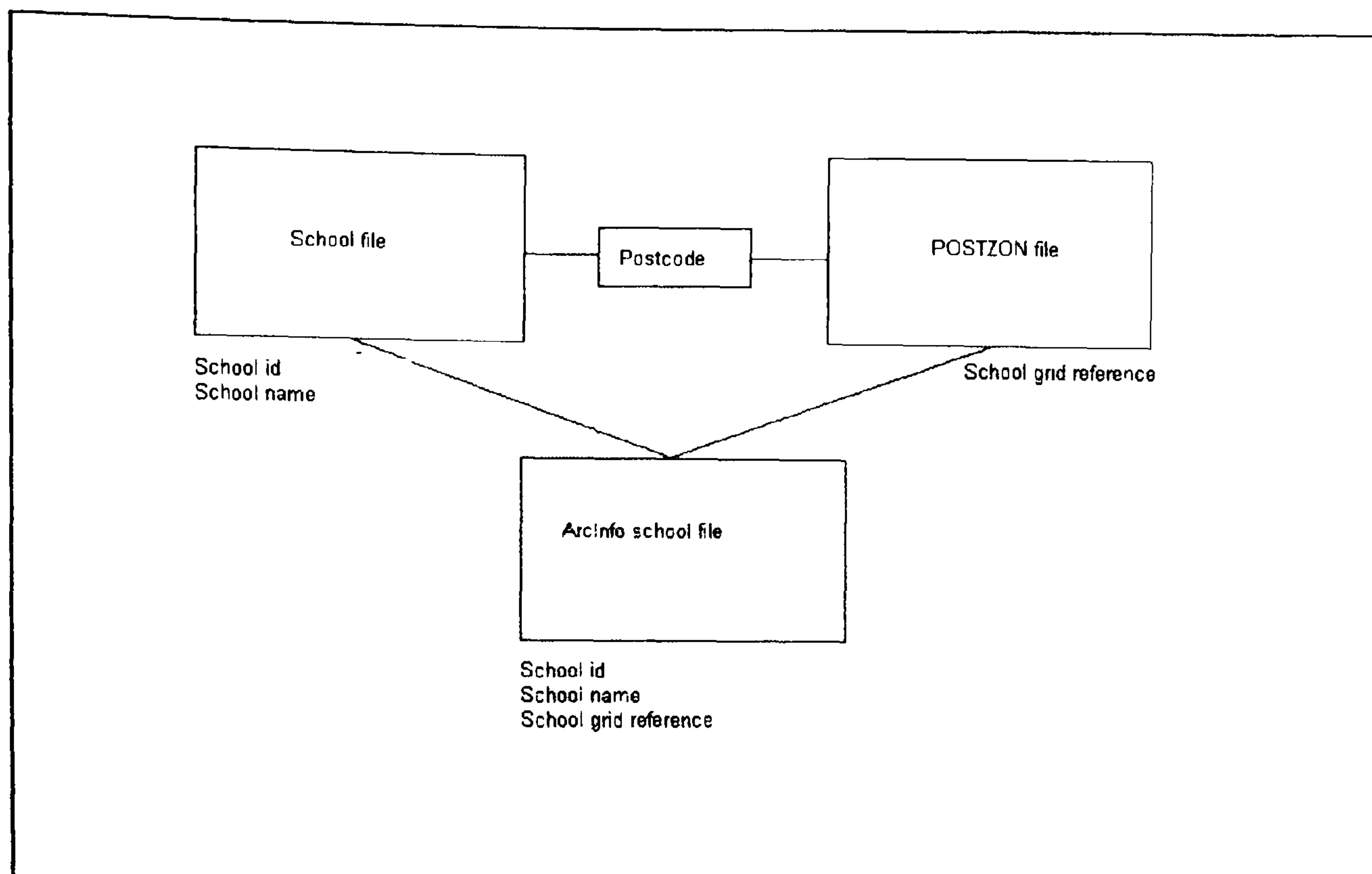


Figure 5.4 Creation of ArcInfo school file

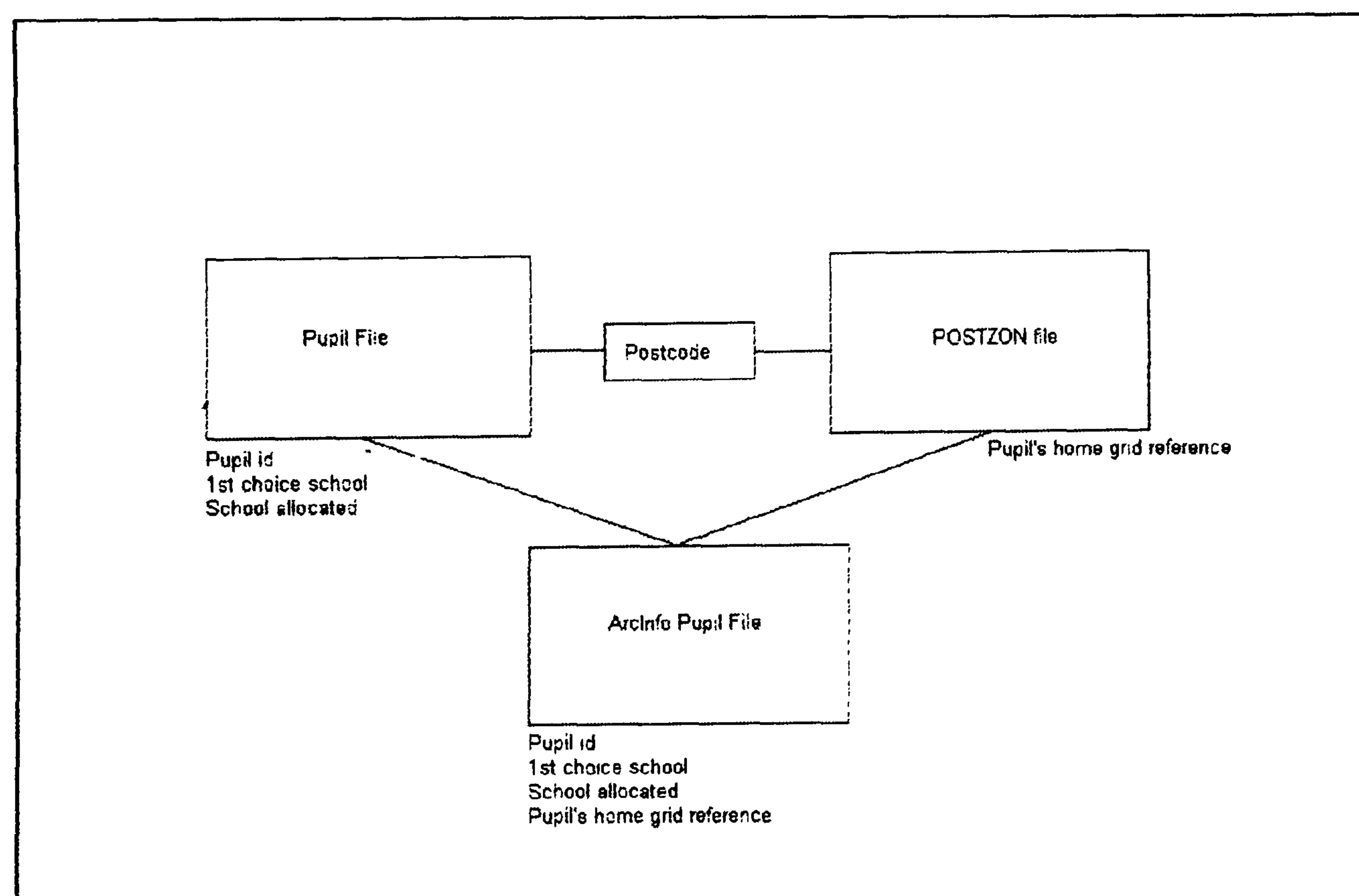


Figure 5.5 Creation of ArcInfo pupil file

school catchments, it was necessary to introduce the LEA-defined secondary school catchment boundaries into ARC/INFO. The LEA supplied these, drawn on a Geographers' A-Z map. The boundaries were digitised to form a polygon coverage. Each polygon was labelled with the 4 digit 'DfEE number' (a unique administrative identifier), of the comprehensive school whose catchment boundary it defined. Finally, the x,y co-ordinates of the coverage were put through a procedure to convert them from their initial x,y values to Ordnance Survey National Grid References, so that they would be on the same spatial reference base as the pupils' home and school locations.

The key ARC/INFO tables, pupil and school point coverages and catchment polygon coverages had been created. Before it was possible to carry out the desired analysis of pupil flows, a number of subsidiary coverages had to be built. A key element of this study is the comparison of *de jure* and *de facto* catchment populations and this was facilitated by the following procedures.

Separate polygon coverages were created for each comprehensive school's *de facto* catchment by using the ARC/INFO reselect command. Then, a set of coverages was created containing the complete set of pupils with homes in particular catchments. The ARC/INFO intersect operation was used on the individual school catchments and the total pupil cohort coverages. For each school, in turn, the catchment boundary was intersected with each year's full pupil file so that only those pupil records that fell within the catchment boundary were included in the output coverage. A simplified example illustrates this procedure. As a starting point, Figure 5.6 shows the home locations of all pupils attending schools NNC3 and NNC4 (all other pupils have been excluded). In Figure 5.7 the intersect procedure has produced a pupil coverage containing only those pupils living in the *de jure* NNC3 catchment. These coverages were exported to the Access database and an 'update query' performed to create a new field in the pupil tables containing the 'DfEE

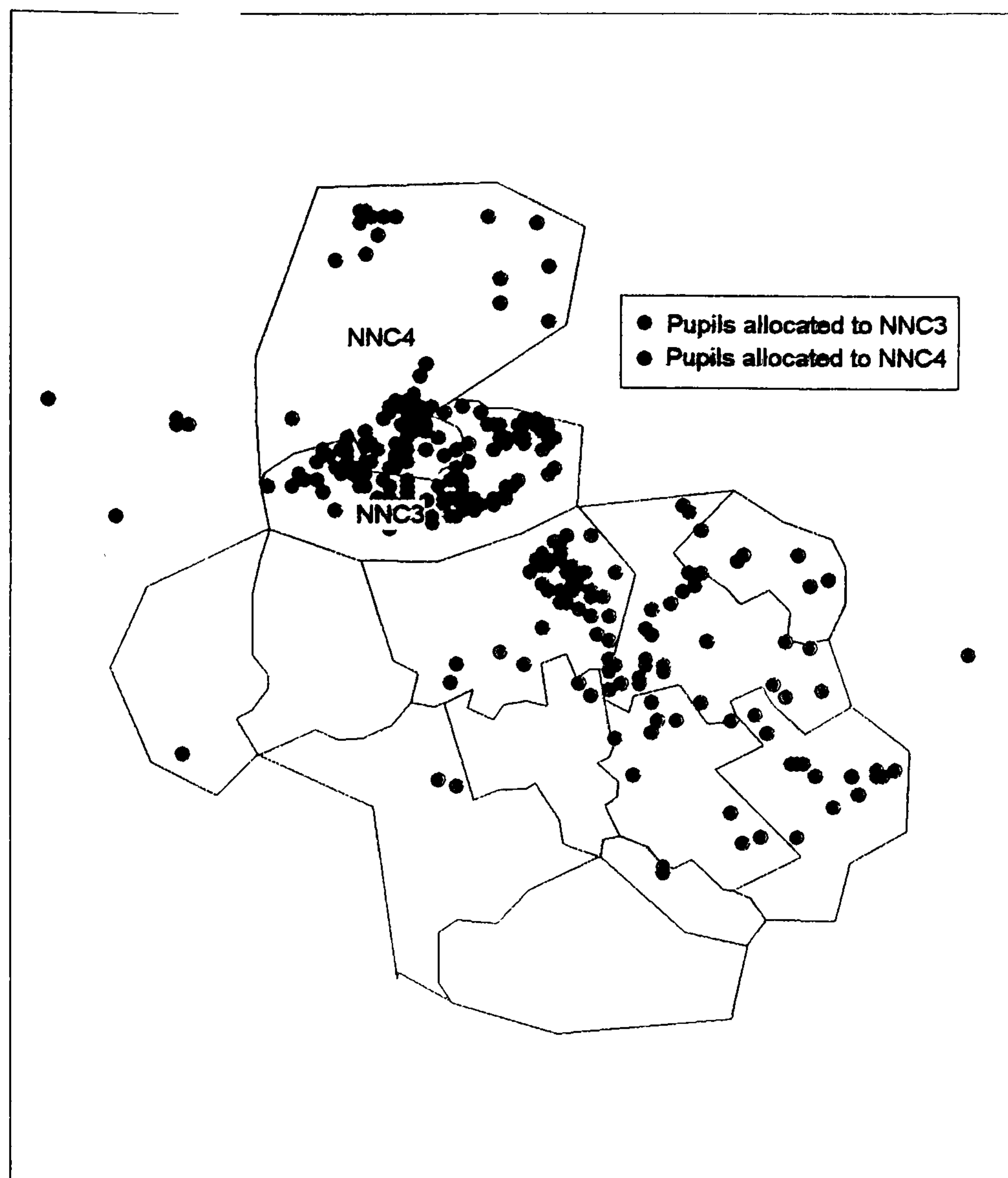


Figure 5.6 Pupils allocated to NNC3 and NNC4

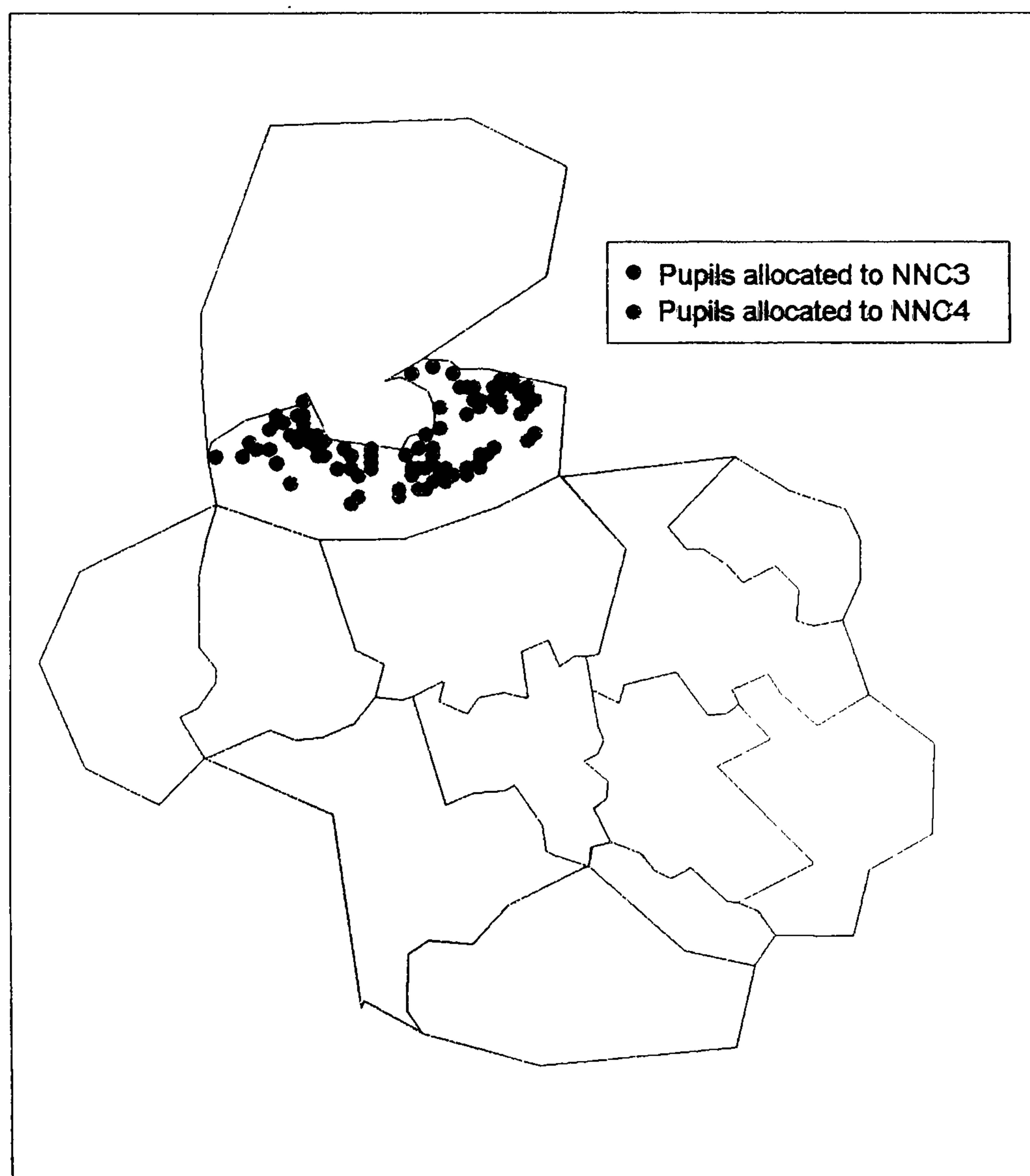


Figure 5.7 Pupils living in NNC3's catchment

number' of the comprehensive school within whose catchment the pupil's home was located. A map of each secondary school's *de facto* catchment is contained in Appendix 1.

Next, a set of point coverages was created, each containing all the pupils attending a particular school for a particular year. The ARC/INFO reselect command was used with the four full pupil cohort files to separate out the required pupil records. The 'school attended' field was used to select the appropriate pupil records for each coverage. In Figure 5.8 this procedure has been used to select all pupils attending NNC3. The same procedure was repeated for pupil's first-choice school.

The next stage was the calculation of pupil home-to-school distances. This is calculated 'as the crow flies'. The ARC/INFO near command calculates the distance for each point in one point coverage to the nearest point in another point coverage and inserts the result into the original coverage's attribute table. Initially, a set of point coverages was created, each containing just one secondary school location. Then, the **near** command was used with each of these coverages together with the coverages containing the pupils attending that school. Thus, the distance from the pupil's home to the school attended was calculated. The results were exported to the Access database and an update query used to produce a new field in the pupil tables containing distance from home to school attended. The school attended might not, of course, be the nearest school, and the distance to the nearest comprehensive school was required in the subsequent analysis. This was calculated by using the near command with the coverages of complete pupil cohorts for each year and a coverage containing all comprehensive schools in the area. The distance from each pupil's home to the nearest comprehensive school, as well as the identity of the school, was output. Again, the results were exported to the Access database and two new fields, distance to nearest comprehensive school and nearest comprehensive school, were created.

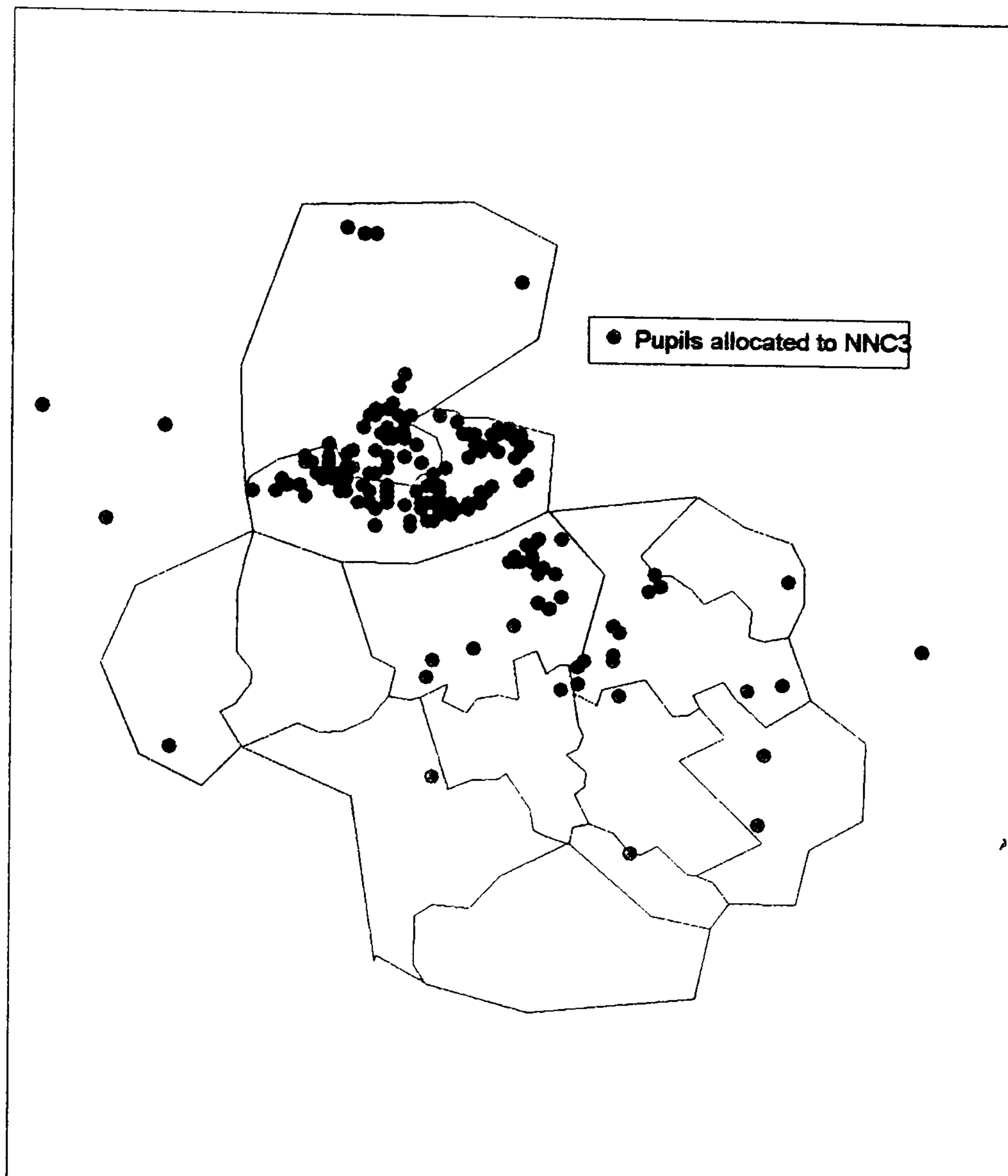


Figure 5.8 pupils allocated to NNC3

The final set of coverages necessary for the GIS analysis were those concerned with pupils on the border of school catchments. These were required for two reasons. First, to establish whether pupils living near catchment boundaries behaved differently to those that live closer to the catchment school. Second, to exclude pupils' home locations that could be allocated to the wrong catchment because of the inadequate resolution of postcodes. The ARC/INFO buffer command was used with each comprehensive school catchment. This procedure creates a 'ring doughnut' polygon with the outside and inside edges of the polygon at a specified distance from the original polygon. In this case, a set of polygon coverages was created consisting of a buffer extending 100 metres either side of each catchment boundary.

Each buffer coverage was then intersected with the total pupil cohort coverages to produce a series of point coverages containing all pupils with homes within a buffer 100m inside a catchment boundary. The results of this operation, again using a simplified pupil population limited to those attending NNC3 and NNC4, are illustrated in Figure 5.9.

Finally, the socio-economic characteristics of pupil populations are summarised by two methods, both of which are based upon 1991 census data. The first is the population deprivation measure most commonly used in UK social policy research, namely the Townsend Index. The second is 'GB Profiler', a small area-profiling program which provides access to the small area census classifications produced by the School of Geography at Leeds University which is free to the academic community. Space does not permit extensive discussion of the various issues involved in the construction and use of these measures and what follows is a brief description of their use in this study. Full accounts of their derivation and application for the Townsend Index are found in Townsend *et al* (1988) and Lee *et al* (1995) and for GB profiler in Blake and Openshaw (1998).

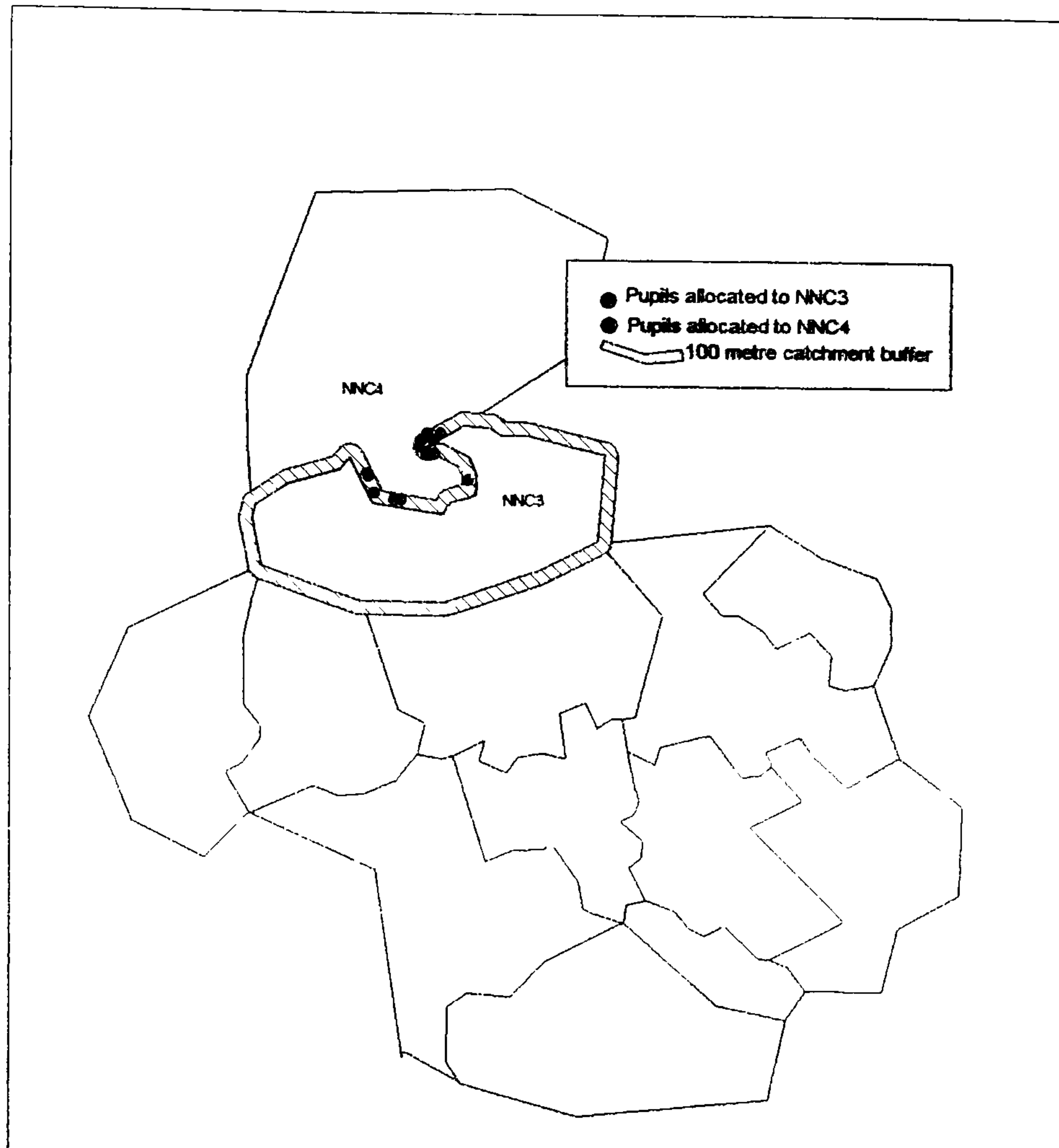


Figure 5.9 Pupils living within 100m of NNC3 catchment boundary

The Townsend Index is derived by the summation of the z-scores of four census variables in an index that has been found to be a good correlate with material and social deprivation in the UK population (Lee *et al*, 1995). The Townsend Index was calculated for each Census Enumeration District (ED) in the study area. Then the 'pc2ed' utility, available from MIDAS, the national research support service based at the University of Manchester, was used to link each year-6 pupil postcode with the appropriate ED and then with the Townsend Index for that ED. Finally, the Townsend Index for each pupil postcode was added to both the Access cohort tables and the ARC/INFO pupil files. The index was used where characterisation of the socio-economic characteristics of pupil populations was required for statistical purposes.

GB Profiler provides a more descriptive census-based view of neighbourhoods in the case-study area. It is the outcome of an ESRC project based at Leeds University whose objective was the production of a geodemographic profiling system for the academic community (comparable commercial products are prohibitively expensive). The system consists of two parts:

- A classification or grouping of areas with similar characteristics. A series of classifications based on the 1991 Census has been developed and they are collectively known as GB Profiles. These classifications are portrayed as a series of 'pen-pictures' which provide a brief characterisation of the people and households that are located within each ED.
- The software that provides an easy-to-use interface to access the classifications. This is called GB Profiler. Classifications are accessed by means of postcodes. These are either typed in singly in interactive mode or supplied to the program in a file in batch mode. The classification for each postcode is then produced (Openshaw, 1998).

For the purposes of this study, these area classifications were used as a method of categorising the socio-economic characteristics of the different neighbourhoods in the case-study area in a more information-rich way than is possible using a uni-dimensional deprivation measure such as the Townsend Index. There are several levels of area classification available to users of the program, varying from five to a hundred classifications. For the sake of clarity of presentation of results, only the five classification levels were used. These are the ‘pen-pictures’ for these classifications:

Struggling: This cluster type includes areas with people and households at the bottom of the social scale, usually living in Local Authority rented housing. Such areas are characterised by high levels of unemployment, ethnic groups, and large numbers of single parents.

Aspiring: Areas which suffer many of the physical problems of struggling neighbourhoods, but whose residents are better-off or are more highly educated and therefore have the potential of being better-off in later life. Typical locations include student areas where the housing stock is usually composed of older converted flats and bedsits.

Established: These cluster types tend to be dominated by middle-aged and more mature families or pensioners. They represent the mortgaged middle-classes living in detached, or more commonly semi-detached, houses.

Climbing: There are some clusters in this type that are better-off Established clusters i.e. comfortable mature middle-class families who now own their own home. However, the typical cluster in this type is characterised by younger families whose head of household is in a managerial occupation. These ‘affluent executives’

tend to be high earning, educated professionals with young families and are owning or buying detached houses.

Prospering: This type includes the clusters that have been identified as the most prosperous in the country. These areas are characterised by older more established ‘affluent executive’ families or older couples (the children having left home) almost always living in large detached houses.

These classifications were added to both the Access cohort tables and the ARC/INFO pupil files.

5.8 GIS research objective analysis.

The previous chapter outlined the research objectives for this study, many of which are suited to GIS analysis. This section briefly summarises the methods used to analyse a number of hypotheses derived from these objectives. All operations were performed using the Microsoft Access database package unless otherwise specified. The normal procedure was to use a ‘create table’ query in Access to produce a table of totals of pupils satisfying the specified criteria that could be immediately entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The tables were normally produced at the aggregate levels of individual schools and for all pupils. Other aggregate analyses, such as by rural and urban school catchments, or by gender, were produced as required. Every procedure had to be repeated for each pupil cohort and the results transferred to the spreadsheet so that year-on-year trends could be calculated. Objectives are again grouped according to the level of aggregation to which they relate.

The parent/child level

Objective 1. What characterises parents who express a preference for a school other than the local catchment comprehensive? What factors in choice are important and what limits parents in their choice?

Hypotheses/procedures:

Any erosion of catchments is primarily due to parents` on catchment borders taking advantage of the increased ease of parental choice

Pupil identity numbers were extracted from the ARC/INFO coverages containing all pupils in a buffer 100m either side of a comprehensive school catchment and exported to the Access database. Totals of pupils within these buffer zones allocated to local schools and to other schools were transferred to Excel. The size of any trend for an increasing number of pupils from buffer zones being allocated to a school other than the local one was compared with the trend for the catchments as a whole.

There are gender differences in the distance children travel to school

The average distance travelled to school was aggregated according to gender and the result transferred to Excel for comparison.

Objective 2. How important are spatial factors for parents in the choice of school relative to other considerations?

Hypotheses/procedures:

Children will travel further to ‘academically successful’ schools than to other schools

Schools were categorised according to the proportion of their pupils gaining 5 or more GCSEs at grade C or above. The average distance travelled to each type of school was then calculated and compared.

Pupils will travel further to grammar and denominational schools than to comprehensive schools and this disparity will be maintained throughout the study period

A series of classes of distance from home-to-school were created for each year and the numbers of pupils in each class calculated for the various school types. The resulting distance-decay curves were then compared.

De facto school catchments will reflect the socio-economic characteristics of the catchment

The average of the socio-economic indices for each pupil allocated to a comprehensive school was calculated and compared with the average socio-economic index of the postcodes within the catchment.

Neighbourhood/community level

Objective 3. What variation is there, spatially and socio-economically, in the factors contributing to choice of secondary school by parents?

Hypotheses/procedures:

Parents whose first choice is not satisfied are more likely to live in the catchments of 'academically unsuccessful' schools.

The academic performance of comprehensive schools whose catchments contained a disproportionate number of children who did not secure their first preference was compared with the rest.

De facto grammar school catchments will reflect the geography of social class

The mean Townsend Index associated with pupils allocated to grammar schools was

calculated and compared with the mean Index for other school types.

Suburban schools are benefiting from parental choice at the expense of inner city comprehensives

The numbers of children who were allocated to New Northwick schools and who lived in Old Northwick catchments, together with the socio-economic characteristics of their home neighbourhoods, were transferred to Excel and any trends identified .

Objective 5. What variation is there, spatially and socio-economically, in the extent to which parents choose out-of-catchment schools?

Hypotheses/procedures:

There are socio-economic differences in the distance children travel to school

The average distance travelled to school was aggregated according to socio-economic grouping, based on the GB Profiler classification of the home postcode, and the results transferred to Excel for comparison.

Parents in 'middle-class' areas are more likely to choose a school for their child outside the catchment containing their home.

Totals of children travelling outside their local catchment were aggregated according to the GB Profiler classification of the home postcode and transferred to Excel for comparison.

Parents are more likely to choose an out-of-catchment school when the socio-economic status of their home neighbourhood is above that of the catchment in which they live.

Parents' home postcodes are categorised according to the decile of the Townsend Index in which they fall and compared with the Townsend Index decile for all parents in the same catchment and with all parents in the local catchment school intake.

The school level

Objective 6. Is parental choice benefiting certain types of school?

Hypotheses/procedures:

Rural schools have much more stable de facto catchments than urban schools

Totals of pupils allocated to schools outside the catchment containing their home were transferred to Excel at the aggregate level of 'rural' and 'urban' school catchments.

Both the absolute level of flows outside the catchment, and the size of any trends in such flows, were compared for rural and urban schools.

'Academically successful' schools will attract an increasing number of children from outside the catchment

Schools were categorised according to the proportion of their pupils gaining 5 or more GCSEs at grade C or above. Totals attending schools from outside the catchment were transferred to Excel and trends for different school types identified.

Schools that lose a large proportion of the pupils from within their catchment will import a correspondingly small number of pupils from other catchments

The ratio of the percentage of pupils travelling outside the catchment to the percentage travelling to the school inside the catchment was calculated for each school. The results were compared and any patterns identified.

Objective 7. What effect are changing pupil flows having on the social mix of secondary schools?

Hypotheses/procedures:

Secondary schools in Eastland have become increasingly socially polarised

The mean Townsend Index for school intakes and catchment populations for each year was calculated and any trends identified.

The LEA level

Objective 8. To what extent is overall choice of out-of-catchment schools increasing?

Hypothesis/procedure:

There has been an increase in the proportion of year-6 children transferring to secondary schools outside the local catchment

The number of pupils allocated to each comprehensive school and the number of pupils within each comprehensive school catchment for each year were transferred to Excel.

Trends in the proportion attending schools outside the 'home' catchment were then examined.

Objective 9. For the LEA area as a whole, has there been a resultant increase in the average length of journey to school?

Hypothesis/procedure:

Children are travelling an increasing distance to school

The average distance from home to allocated school was transferred to Excel for each year and the trend examined.

Objective 10. Can catchments be characterised in relation to their permeability?

Hypothesis/procedure:

The geographical shape of a catchment will influence the proportion of children travelling to other schools.

A simple index of shape was derived by dividing the area of a catchment with the area of a circle drawn through the catchment's longest axis (Unwin, 1981). This index was then correlated with the proportion of pupils allocated to out-of-catchment schools.

Objective 11. Are catchments still significant for the case-study LEA?

Hypotheses/procedures:

De jure catchment boundaries generally correspond to schools' de facto intakes.

Maps were produced in the GIS that allowed comparison of *de facto* intakes with *de jure* catchment boundaries. The proportion of pupils who lived closer to another comprehensive than their catchment school was calculated in the GIS and the destinations of this sub-group examined to identify whether catchment boundaries might be redrawn so that they better reflected *de facto* school intakes.

A large proportion of out-of-catchment flows in Old Northwick are a consequence of the discrepancy between the year-six catchment population and school Planned Admissions Limits.

The number of parents who were unable to secure a place for their child in their home catchment comprehensive in the first round of preference satisfaction was calculated by catchment. If the discrepancy between PAL and catchment population was a significant factor in inter-catchment movements, then catchments with the biggest discrepancies would be expected to have substantial numbers of parents forced to choose elsewhere

because the local school is over-subscribed.

Objective 12. What role do LEA admissions procedures play in the choice of school?

Hypothesis/procedure:

Grammar and denominational schools will attract disproportionate numbers of pupils from the catchments of 'academically unsuccessful' schools

The proportion of pupils gaining places at grammar and denominational schools was calculated for each catchment and any patterns identified.

Objective 13. Is it increasingly difficult for LEAs to manage the system?

Hypothesis/procedure:

Increase in out-of-catchment movement is unpredictable both in extent and in terms of the schools that benefit from greater fluidity within the system.

Changes in the degree of out-of-catchment movement were calculated both for the system as a whole and for individual schools catchments.

Objective 14. What contribution does the choices of parents who live outside the LEA make to the overall pattern of pupil movements in Eastland?

Hypothesis/procedure:

There has been an increase in the number of children attending schools in the case study area from outside the LEA boundary

The total number of pupils for each year who are identified in the pupil file as coming from outside the LEA boundary was transferred to Excel and the trend examined.

5.9 Limitations of GIS analysis.

The GIS analysis, as outlined above, can provide considerable insights into the many flows and interactions involved in the parental choice system in the case-study area, and the results are presented in the following chapter. However, GIS, as used here, is inevitably better at providing a descriptive, empirical account of the operation of the system than in identifying the underlying motivational and decision-making processes amongst parents and children that give rise to these patterns. Particular care has to be taken to avoid the ecological fallacy, namely attributing the socio-economic characteristics of an individual's locality to the individual household. For example, a catchment with a high proportion of working-class parents may also exhibit a high rate of movement of children to schools outside the catchment. It would be an ecological fallacy to assume automatically that these children were necessarily working-class. Indeed, it could be reasonably hypothesised that in this case it was primarily middle-class parents sending their children to more middle-class catchments. In the case of parental choice, parents may be choosing to send their children to schools outside the local catchment precisely because they are 'different' to their neighbours.

Furthermore, use of 'as the crow flies' distance as the measure of the length of home-school journeys is consistent but may be misleading when physical barriers or the availability of public transport may significantly affect which schools are easily accessible by parents in particular locations. Modern GIS has the functionality to address some of these factors and, with more time, a more sophisticated approach could have been used. Even then, the researcher only has a physical model of pupil movements and the home-school distances derived from the model may not correspond to parents' actual perceptions of which schools are 'local'.

For the reasons in the previous two paragraphs, a thorough analysis of the parental choice system requires a survey of the parents making the decisions. Such a survey can establish both the qualitative factors underlying the choice process, and identify socio-economic factors influencing pupil flows. The synthesis of the results of the survey of parents with the results of the GIS analysis is discussed in Chapter Nine.

Chapter 6: GIS Analysis of Eastland Secondary Transfers

6.1 Introduction.

Earlier chapters have described potentially highly significant change in the way parents choose a secondary school for their child. This chapter attempts, through the use of the GIS techniques outlined in the previous chapter, to establish the extent to which real changes have been taking place in patterns of secondary school transfer in the case-study area between 1991 and 1995. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part (section 6.2) presents a straightforward outline of patterns and changes in out-of-catchment movement, describing any spatial variations in the likelihood of parents choosing out-of-catchment schools. This part uses, to some extent, the analytical framework set out in previous chapters, viewing pupil movements at various scales such as the LEA or the school. However, whilst this structure proved excellent as a basis for the GIS analysis, it is less suitable for the presentation of the majority of the results of that analysis. Influences on choice such as the socio-economic characteristics of school catchments and parents home operate at every level of aggregation. In order to avoid repetition a different approach is adopted. The chapter's second part (sections 6.3-6.7) seeks as much explanation for these patterns and changes as can be provided by the GIS analysis through a consideration of various contextual factors. These different factors, such as demographics and spatial influences on choice, provide the framework for this part of the chapter.

The first part begins with a broad overview of the extent of out-of-catchment movement in the case-study area at various levels of aggregation ranging from the whole of Eastland down to the local neighbourhood represented by a unit postcode. This is followed by consideration of the extent of countervailing flows at the catchment level. Noteworthy trends in levels and patterns of out-of-catchment movement within the five-year case-study

period are identified. The effects of any changes in catchment permeability on absolute levels of pupil movement within the secondary system are examined with particular concern for the identification of schools which are 'winners' and 'losers' from the parental choice process.

The spatial and temporal variability in the patterns of pupil movement revealed by the analysis in the first part demands the careful evaluation of the importance of the various contexts that may be influencing school-choice. This is contained in the second part of the chapter. Here, a number of potential factors in parental choice (geographic, social, educational and procedural) are considered in turn. The shape or size of a secondary school catchment may be an important influence on the choice of a school and the interaction of such factors with the distance of a child's home-to-school journey is examined. Then, the demographic structure of the system is investigated with a particular focus on imbalances between catchment populations and school admissions limits (PALs). Publication of league tables has been justified on the grounds that they provide parents with better information to guide their choice of a school for their child and the analysis attempts to establish whether examination results are an important criterion in patterns of parental choice. The impact of the grammar and denominational schools on the secondary transfer system is also considered here. The importance of social factors in influencing the practice of parental choice was emphasised by many of the authors cited in Chapter Three. In section 6.6 there is an in-depth examination of the effects of social characteristics on the outcomes of the secondary transfer process, both in terms of parents' home neighbourhoods and of the social make-up of the schools themselves. Finally, this chapter evaluates the potential importance of Eastland's secondary transfer procedures in determining parental choices, in particular the possible consequences of an unsuccessful first preference. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main patterns that have been revealed by the GIS analysis

and an outline of those issues that this methodology could not resolve and are therefore explored by the social survey.

Some specific terminological conventions have been used in this chapter. Pupils who transferred to secondary school in autumn 1991 are referred to as the '1991 cohort'; similarly for the years 1993-1995. If a specific cohort is not referenced, then data have been averaged over the four years. The lack of 1992 data was explained in the Chapter Four - any reference to the range 1991-1995 implicitly excludes 1992. Pupils who transfer to an out-of-catchment secondary school are described as 'exports' with respect to their home catchment and 'imports' for the receiving school. Pupils who remain within a catchment are 'non-movers'.

For the purposes of this analysis, a transfer to a grammar or a denominational school is defined as an export even if such a school is in a child's local comprehensive catchment. There are three main justifications for this approach. First, comprehensive school catchments play no part in the selection procedures for grammar and denominational schools. All these schools are located near catchment boundaries (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Any tendency to recruit children predominantly from the immediate locality would be likely to affect schools in adjacent catchments as much as, or more than, the school within whose catchment the grammar or denominational school is located. Second, grammar and denominational school intakes are much more widely dispersed than the more locally concentrated intakes of comprehensive schools (Figure 6.2.1 for example). Finally, the acceptability of this approach was tested by evaluating the effects of using alternative definitions for exports for the four comprehensive schools with grammar and denominational schools within their catchment boundaries. In the first definition, transfers to these schools are defined as exports, in the second they are defined as non-movers. Use of the former definition made little difference with two of the schools showing a 4% higher

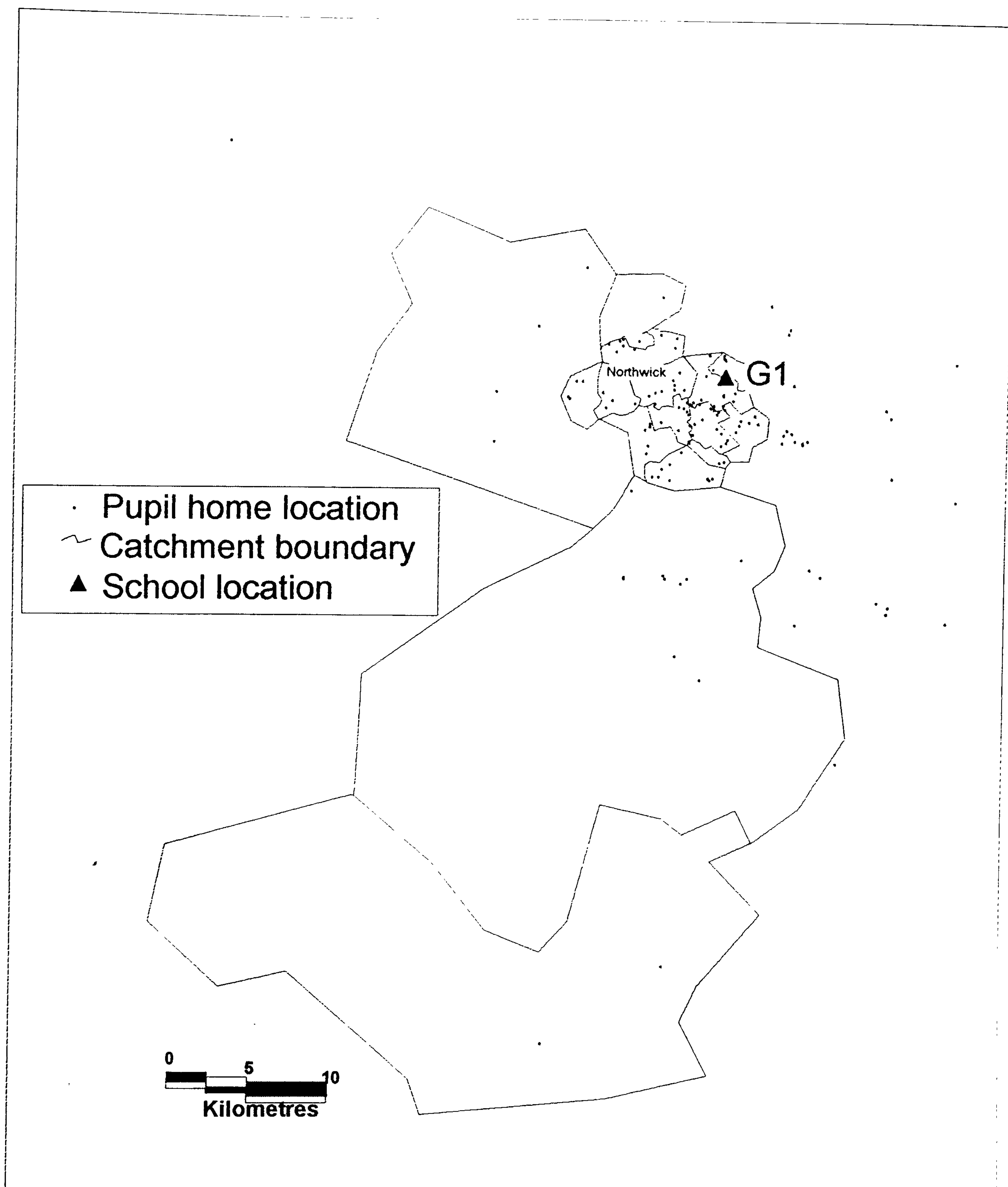


Figure 6.2..1 Home locations of G1 1995 intake

export rate, while the other two schools' rates of pupil loss were only marginally affected (full details in tables in Appendix 2).

Sometimes 'exports' will be categorised according to whether the receiving school is a grammar, denominational or other comprehensive school, but otherwise the term refers to the choice of any school other than the local catchment comprehensive.

6.2 The extent and varying character of inter-catchment movements.

This section sets out the patterns of movement between catchments as revealed by the GIS analysis and it addresses a number of the research objectives identified in Chapter three:

- How substantial are the numbers of year-6 children transferring to out-of-catchment schools and is there spatial variation in export rates?
- Are the schools that experience the greatest losses from their catchment the least likely to import pupils from elsewhere?
- Have levels of catchment loss increased within the study period?
- Are there consistent trends in patterns of choice over time or is it difficult to predict the popularity of a school in a particular year?
- Does where parents live affect the choice of an alternative to the local comprehensive?
- How likely are parents' stated preferences to be satisfied?

These questions are considered at the appropriate spatial scales, in particular at the catchment level. There is also substantial analysis comparing patterns of movement in, and between, Old Northwick, New Northwick and the rural hinterland.

6.2.1 Eastland's educational geography.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it may be helpful to provide a brief reminder of the geography of the Eastland educational system. There are three rural comprehensive schools (RC1-RC3), four comprehensive schools in the predominantly middle-class western suburbs (NNC1-NNC4) of 'New Northwick' and nine comprehensives (ONC1-ONC9), three grammar (G1-G3) and two denominational schools (D1-D2) in 'Old Northwick' (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Approximately 6% of pupils attended denominational schools, 10% grammar and 84% comprehensive schools.

6.2.2 Catchment leakage rates.

Between 1991 and 1995, on average, 35% of year-6 children in Eastland transferred to a school other than their local catchment comprehensive. This figure confirms the importance of parental choice in the Eastland secondary school system over the study period. Predictably, the three rural catchments are considerably more water-tight than their urban equivalents. The mean rural out-of-catchment export rate is 9% contrasting with figures of 33% for New Northwick and 44% for Old Northwick. The latter statistic, in particular, emphasises the fluidity of pupil-movement in a secondary-transfer system that is far from a 'free market' and retains a significant degree of LEA management. As Table 4.1 showed, overall spare capacity in the secondary school system was fairly stable during the study period, and is not considered an important factor in any variation in the levels of pupil movement.

At the catchment level, export rates vary from 3% for the extremely rural RC2 to 70% for ONC3 - a school that is located in a very deprived area and which only converted from secondary-modern to comprehensive status in 1991 (see Table 6.2.1). Between these two extremes there is considerable variability, some unexpected, in the extent to which pupils are lost from catchments. The rural catchments bordering the city export about 10% of their

pupils. In middle-class New Northwick two comprehensives lose between 25% and 30% of their pupils, while the other two lose nearly 40% - a surprisingly large figure for schools in such well-favoured parts of the city. There are four Old Northwick comprehensives with lower levels of pupil-loss than these two schools, all with more deprived catchments. The greatest variability can be found in Old Northwick, with four schools losing over 50% of the year-6 children in their catchment whereas for ONC4 and ONC5 the export rate is a relatively low 20%.

School	% exports	% imports
RC2	3	10
RC1	11	12
RC3	11	5
ONC4	22	23
ONC5	22	19
NNC3	27	44
NNC2	29	35
ONC1	39	46
ONC9	40	22
NNC4	40	45
NNC1	40	44
ONC7	43	37
ONC6	50	16
ONC8	55	34
ONC2	57	13
ONC3	70	34

Table 6.2.1 Eastland secondary school catchment exports/imports - Mean rates: 1991-1995

Sorted by ascending export rate

6.2.3 Net movements between catchments

Clearly, one school's loss will be another school's gain and this section identifies the destinations of the children moving out-of-catchment. If parental choices are primarily based on academic criteria, those schools with the highest export rate would be expected to be least successful in attracting children from elsewhere. Alternatively, if moves between catchments are primarily based on factors related to parental convenience, such as ease of access, flows across catchment boundaries might be roughly balanced. Examination of net

flows can therefore provide at least some (admittedly crude) insights into the way that parental choice is operating.

A considerable number of parents are, of course, rejecting all comprehensives, not just the local school. Exports to grammar and denominational schools, averaged over the study period, account for 25% of losses from New Northwick, 39% from Old Northwick and 70% from rural catchments. The latter figure is striking. Alternative comprehensive schools appear to be just as accessible as grammar schools for rural children. Presumably those parents who reject the local comprehensive for a grammar school are characterised by strong academic or social choice criteria that do not apply to other types of school. A more detailed analysis is required before coming to any conclusions about the preferences of urban parents.

Examination of net flows at the catchment level (Figures 6.2.2 and 6.2.3) reveals that some schools experience substantial losses from their catchments. Out-of-catchment flows from New Northwick comprehensives are more than compensated by imports from elsewhere. In many Old Northwick schools, however, there are large net outflows. For example, ONC2, ONC6 and ONC3 replace only 12%, 19% and 21%, respectively, of their losses with pupils from outside the catchment. Only four schools in Old Northwick receive imports on the same scale as their exports and only ONC1 shows a net surplus. All New Northwick catchments, on the other hand, make net gains though even the catchment with the biggest net gain, NNC3, loses 57 pupils to other schools (mainly to other comprehensives). Some catchments are characterised by high levels of movement in both directions. Examples are ONC7, importing 100 pupils whilst exporting 125, and NNC1 for whom the equivalent figures are 79 and 65. Thus, whilst there is some evidence that certain schools may be 'losers' as a result of parental choice, no schools emerge as clear 'winners' at this stage. Flows between catchments are not only high, but are also complex with no immediate clear

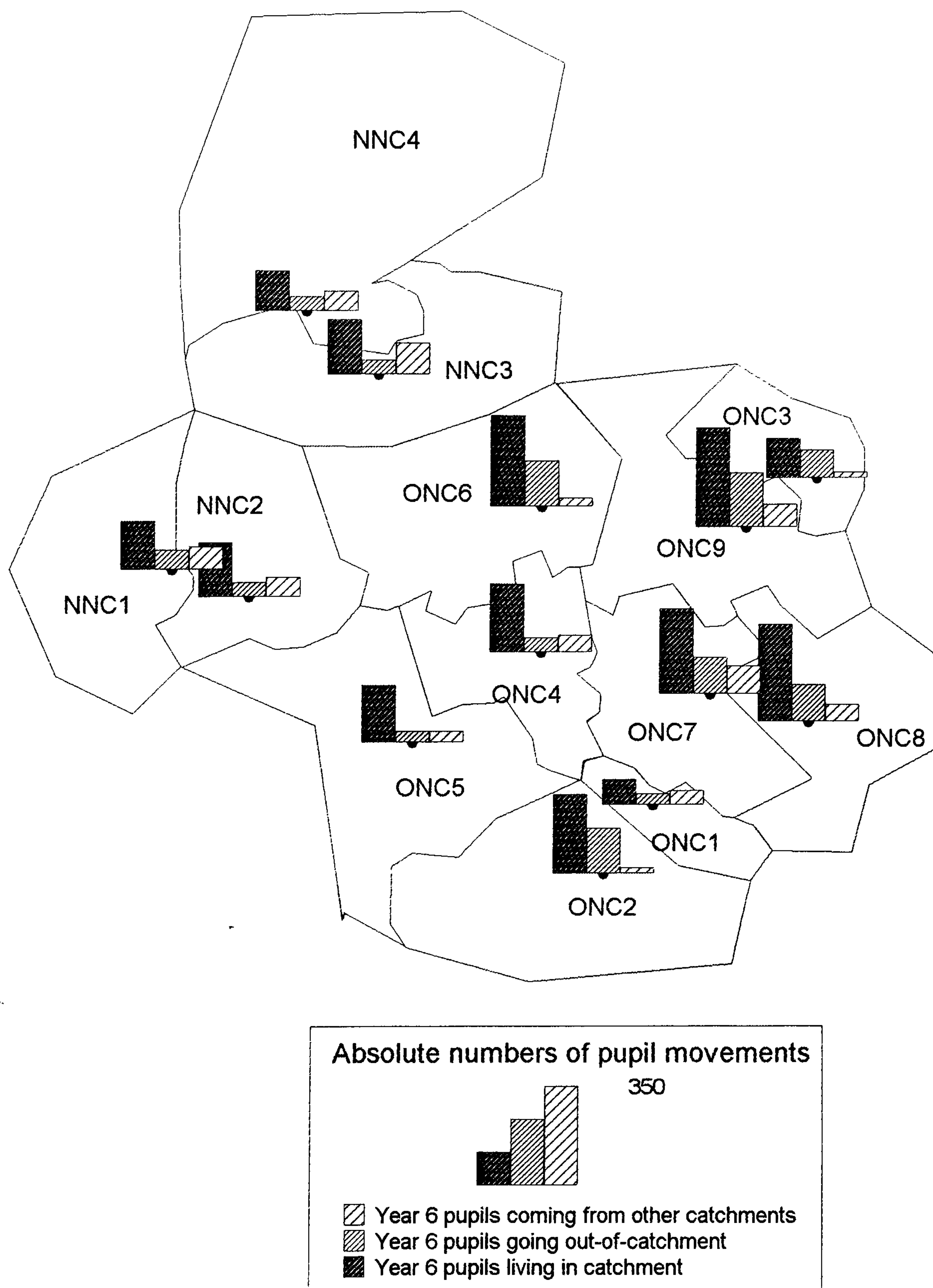


Figure 6.2.2 Year-6 pupil movements - mean totals 1991-1995

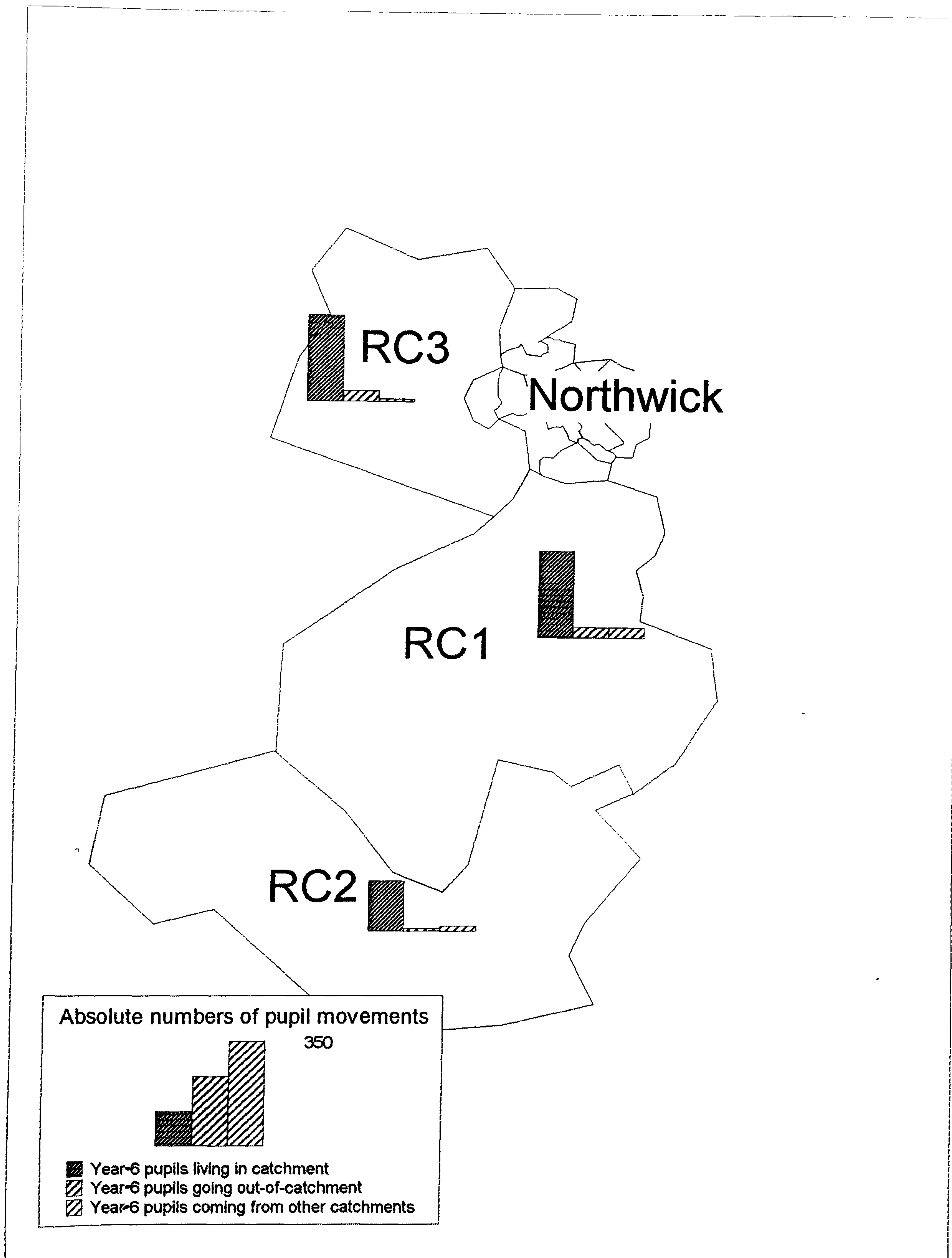


Figure 6.2.3 Rural catchment year-6 pupil movements - mean totals 1991-1995

patterns emerging. In particular, the inverse relationship between catchment export and import rates that might be expected is absent.

6.2.4 Trends in catchment losses.

Critics and advocates of parental choice alike believe that the extent of parental choice is almost certainly increasing and that there may be significant changes in the way it is being expressed. Amongst potential factors in such changes are the increased availability of 'consumer information' such as school league tables and the reduced powers of LEAs to manage the system. The preceding analysis has used data averaged over the study period. Such aggregation may conceal important information about developing patterns of pupil movements between catchments. The analysis that follows is concerned with temporal variation in catchment pupil losses. Two main questions are asked. First, is the overall extent of parental choice increasing? Then, assuming that that is the case, does this increase in fluidity in the transfer system manifest itself in simple, predictable trends at the catchment level or is the system more chaotic?

The hypothesis that parents are increasingly likely to choose schools for their children outside the local catchment is, perhaps, the most fundamental in this research. The analysis confirms that this is the case. There has been a small but steady increase from 33% to 39% in the proportion of children attending an out-of-catchment school (Figure 6.2.4). Only in 1993 did a rise in parents opting for grammar schools play a significant part in the overall increase in out-of-catchment moves. These results correspond with the perception that parents are making increasing use of their 'right to choose', or at least express a preference for, their child's secondary school.

6.2.5 Spatio-temporal variation in catchment export rates

The steady increase in export rate is replicated in both Old and New Northwick but in the rural areas there is a decline in numbers leaving the catchment until 1995 when they rise

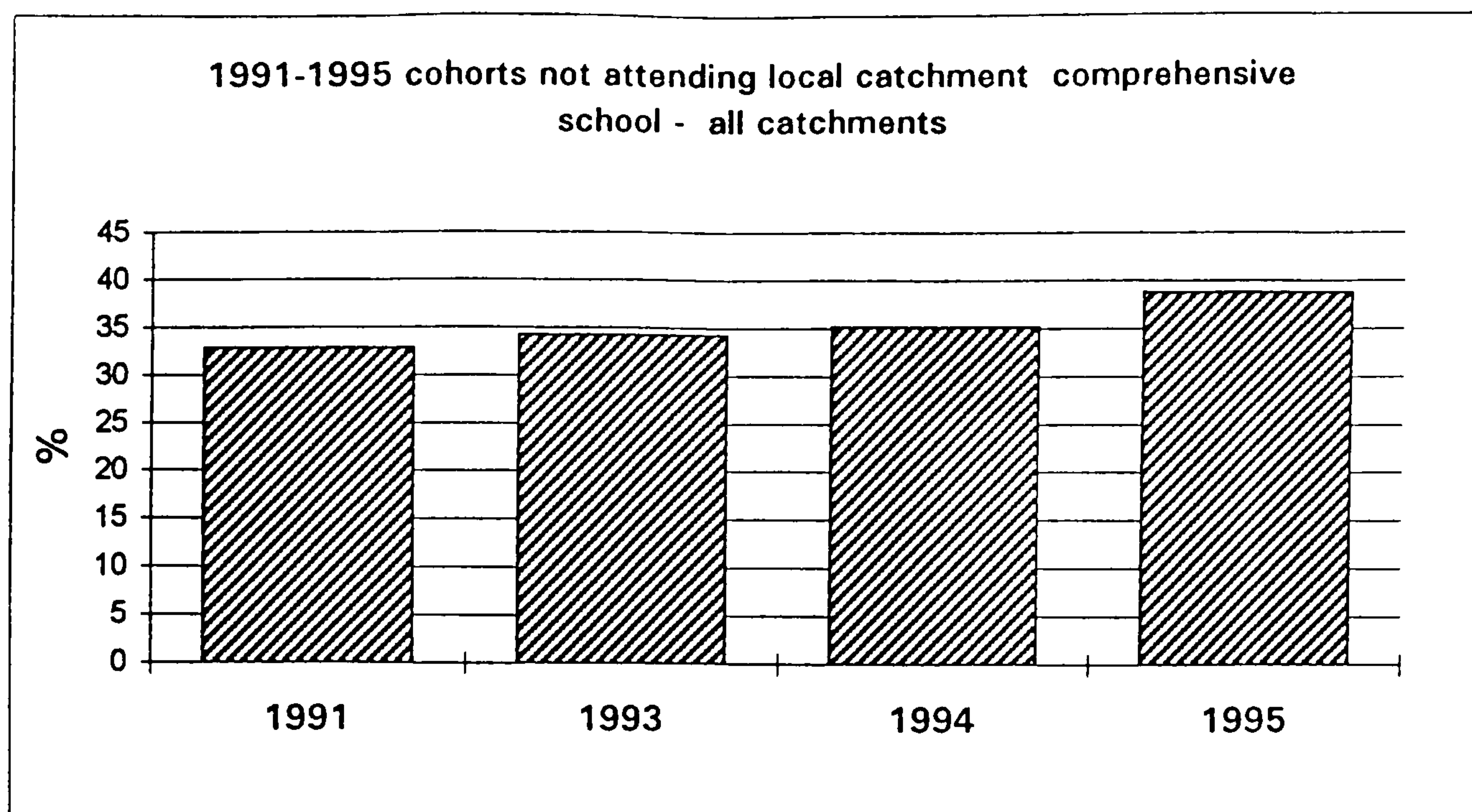


Figure 6.2.4 Trend in out-of-catchment movement - all catchments

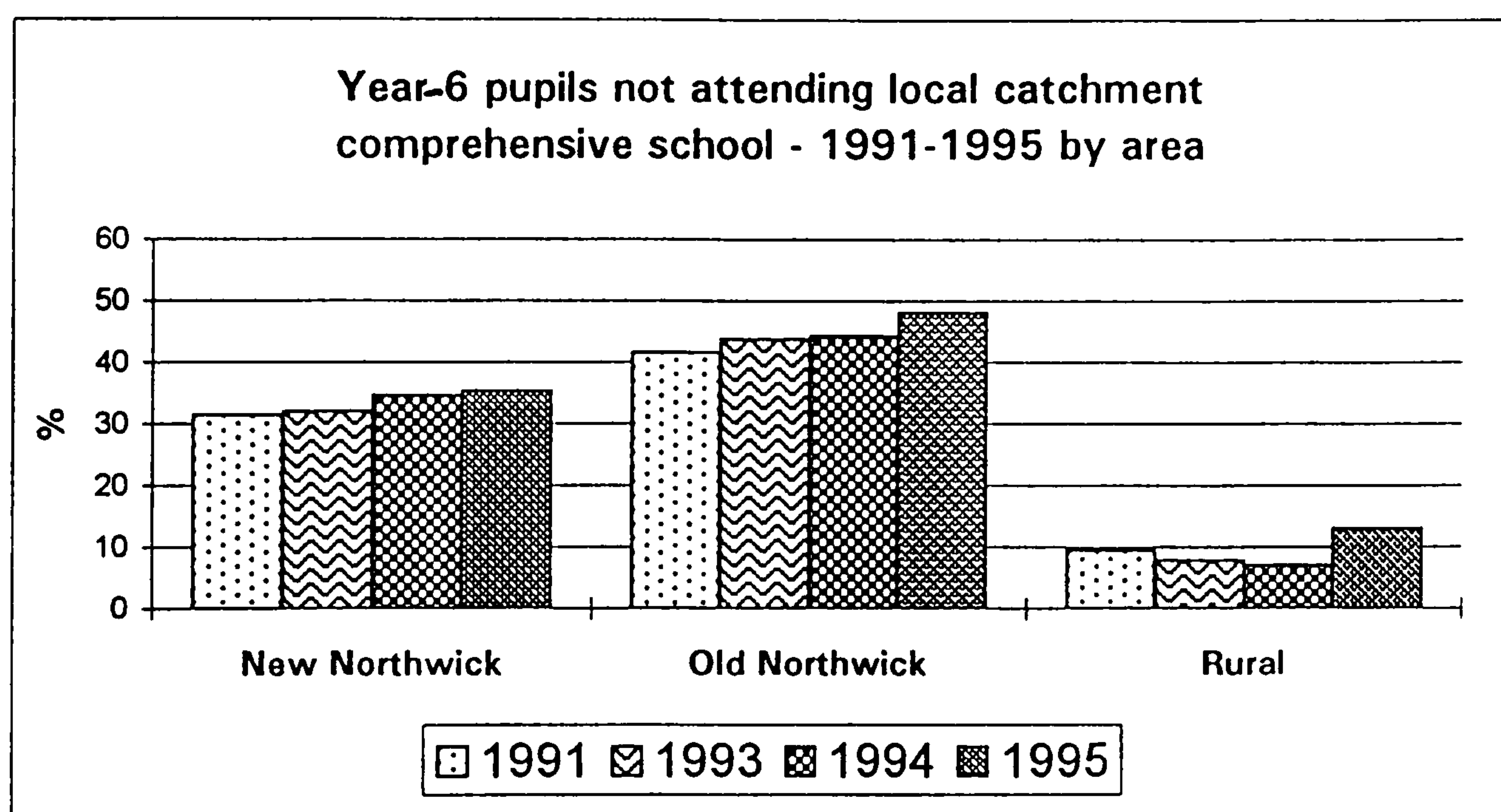


Figure 6.2.5 Trend in out-of-catchment movement - by area

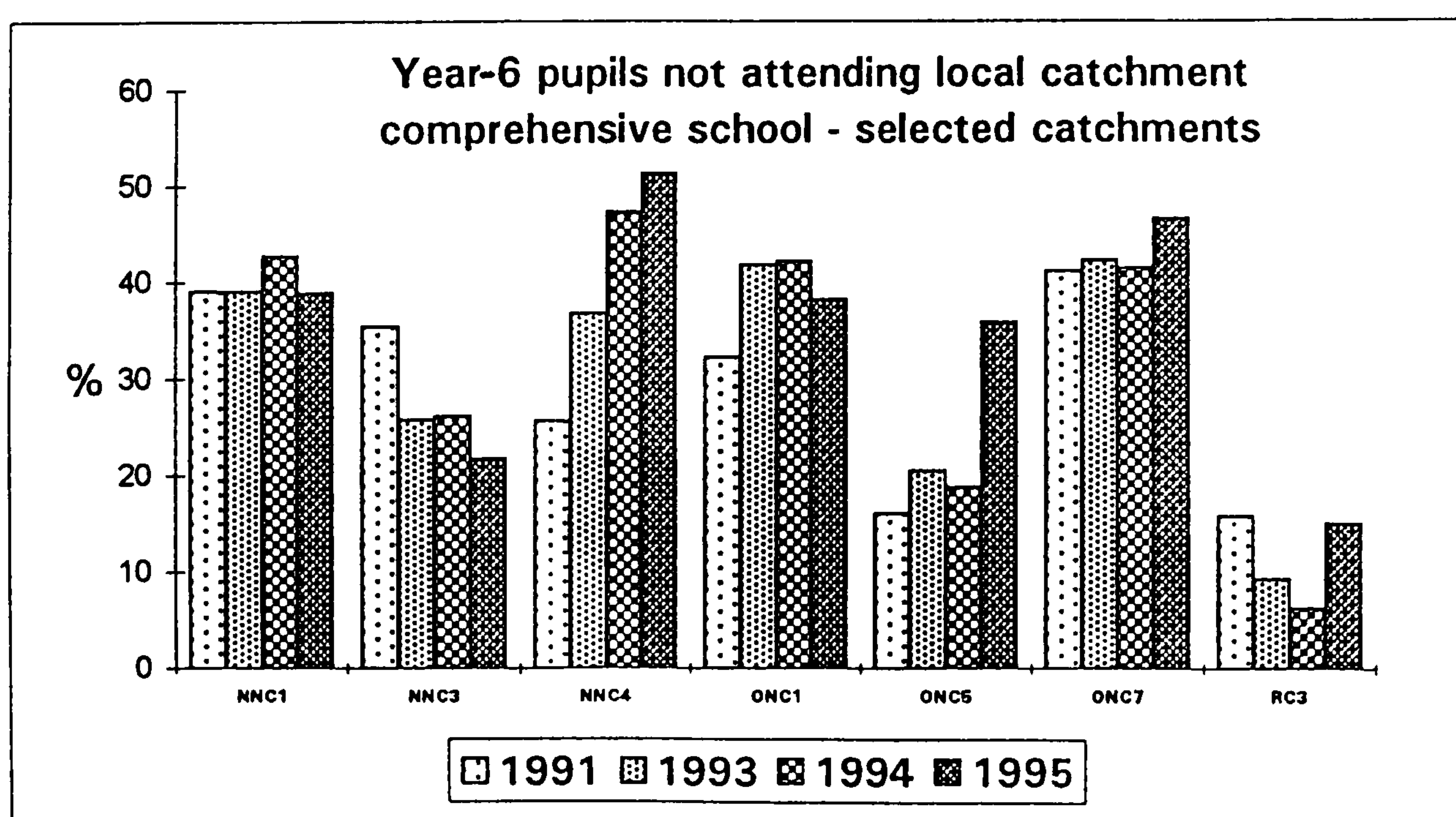


Figure 6.2.6 Trend in out-of-catchment movement - selected schools

sharply (Figure 6.2.5). This initial illustration of variability both in the rate and the directionality of trends in out-of-catchment movement of pupils is reinforced by analysis at the catchment level (Figure 6.2.6 gives examples, Appendix 2 gives full table). Some schools (such as NNC4, ONC7) are experiencing a steady rise in levels of catchment loss. Others, in contrast, are increasingly retaining pupils within their catchment (e.g. NNC3). It would appear that some comprehensive schools are taking advantage of the greater losses from other catchments and are clearly succeeding in the competition for parental choices. With the existing over-subscription criteria and schools unable or disinclined to expand capacity, such successes will inevitably attract more children from their own catchment which will therefore export less elsewhere. This may, to some extent, explain the fluctuating fortunes of some of the schools which have experienced both increases and decreases in export rates in the study period (e.g. ONC3, RC3).

The predictability of trends in catchment exports was measured through a chi-square analysis comparing actual increase/decrease in export rate with Eastland's mean rate of increase for 1991-1995. Seven catchments, wide-ranging in character, are found to display statistically significant variations from the overall trend (Table 6.2.2).

School	p <0.05	Chi squared statistic
NNC1	N	-
NNC2	N	-
NNC3	Y	14.74
NNC4	Y	20.15
ONC1	N	-
ONC2	N	-
ONC3	Y	15.00
ONC4	Y	8.73
ONC5	Y	9.58
ONC6	Y	9.04
ONC7	N	-
ONC8	N	-
ONC9	Y	17.06
RC1	N	-
RC2	N	-
RC3	N	-

Table 6.2.2 - χ^2 values for temporal variation in pupils export rates
(Y = significant at p<0.05, N = not significant)

Such unpredictability suggests that the operation of parental choice processes is producing more complex changes in inter-catchment flows than is posited by the simple ‘winner-loser’ model. It is likely that, as a school gains in popularity, those parents who would have chosen it previously are now forced by over-subscription criteria to choose an alternative school. This ‘redistribution’ of children is likely to have ‘knock-on’ effects as the system adjusts to changed levels of popularity in individual schools, with consequent variation in both catchment export and import rates. Furthermore, this unpredictability lends support to the concerns of Higgs *et al* (1997) about the efficiency implications of the inability of an LEA to predict confidently future student numbers for schools in the context of a fluid educational market.

To summarise, popular schools may fill up with pupils from their own catchment and therefore not figure amongst those schools that attract the greatest number of imports. Thus, although one might have expected high imports to be a mark of a popular school, this is not necessarily so. Indeed the reverse may be the case. A school’s position in any ‘import league table’ depends on the balance between a school’s popularity, its capacity and the number of year-6 children in the catchment.

6.2.6 Spatial variation in catchment export destinations

The focus so far has primarily been on catchment losses. However, if parents are to reject the local school, there must be one that is accessible and, in some way, more attractive. The analysis now switches to a consideration of the destinations of the exports.

Significant variations in pupil flows between Old and New Northwick and the rural hinterland are immediately apparent (illustrated in Table 6.2.3). About 5% of rural children gain places at grammar schools, the great majority of exports from the rural area. Similarly, about 6% of New Northwick parents also choose a grammar school. In contrast with the

rural catchments, though, about 25% of New Northwick children are attending an out-of-catchment comprehensive. Compared with New Northwick, Old Northwick catchments export similar (though slightly greater) proportions of children to other comprehensives and grammar schools but additionally send many more children to denominational schools (about 20% of all pupil exports compared with 7% for New Northwick).

Catchment	comprehensive	grammar	denominational
NNC1	32	6	3
NNC2	24	3	1
NNC3	17	9	2
NNC4	29	8	3
ONC1	27	3	8
ONC2	30	13	14
ONC3	60	3	7
ONC4	7	10	4
ONC5	10	5	7
ONC6	37	7	7
ONC7	23	11	9
ONC8	33	10	12
ONC9	25	6	9
RC1	1	8	1
RC2	2	1	0
RC3	5	4	2
Old Northwick	27	8	9
New Northwick	25	6	2
Rural	3	5	1
All catchments	22	7	6

Table 6.2.3 - Mean % of exports by type of school chosen (1991-1995)

The low figures for the rural areas could be construed as suggesting that parents are, on the whole, genuinely satisfied with their local comprehensive schools. Alternatively, it may only be the strength of feeling of those who prefer grammar schools that overcomes the gravity of distance. Rural parents might prefer some urban comprehensives, but the costs of the increased home-school journey are too high for the benefits gained. Similarly, in New Northwick, parents may also be rejecting the local comprehensive and choosing a grammar school at the expense of longer journeys. However, the high proportion of New Northwick parents choosing alternative comprehensives is initially puzzling given that all four comprehensive schools located there enjoy the socially favourable kind of catchment that

would be expected to prosper under liberalised parental choice (the explanation for these outflows is revealed shortly). Old Northwick displays a much more complex picture with significant outflows to all school types. In order to understand what is happening, pupil flows at the catchment level are now examined.

Tabulation of the number of pupils by catchment attending different schools (annual tables displayed in Appendix 3, mean summary in Table 6.2.4) immediately reveals that the high level of the outflows from New Northwick catchments is a local artefact. There are two binary systems of recruitment with each pair of schools located close together in a self-contained suburb. Less than 13% of parents choose a school other than one of the two local comprehensives - a level of pupil-loss comparable to the rural catchments adjacent to the city. Some parents choose a denominational or grammar school, but less than 1% select a comprehensive outside the local suburb (and that includes the alternative New Northwick suburb).

Intake school/school type	Catchment					
	NNC1	NNC2	NNC3	NNC4	Old Northwick	Rural
NNC1	60.0	23.1	0.0	0.4	9.9	1.9
NNC2	29.3	71.4	0.4	0.0	7.3	1.0
NNC3	0.3	0.3	72.6	27.4	21.4	1.3
NNC4	0.3	0.1	15.5	60.2	14.5	1.2
Grammar & denominational	8.5	4.3	10.8	11.1	-	-
Other Old Northwick	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.7	-	-
Rural	1.0	0.4	0.3	0.2	-	-

Table 6.2.4 - % movement of year-6 New Northwick pupils between catchments - 1991-1995 means

It may be more realistic to regard the two New Northwick suburbs as discrete catchments with a pair of secondary schools in each. Viewed in this way, the high levels of catchment losses revealed earlier are more appearance than reality.

However, while, taken together, these four catchments may lose few pupils to the rest of the secondary system, the mutual interaction between the neighbouring pairs of schools

may give rise to problems of planning for local Heads. For example, NNC3 increased its popularity with respect to NNC4 in the study period, raising its imports from its neighbour from 19 to 50 pupils whilst reducing its exports to this school from 49 to 23 children. As a consequence, in 1995 NNC4 imported almost 50% of its intake from Old Northwick compared with less than 10% in 1991. Clearly, this is a school that is being forced to market itself effectively to the rest of the city in order to maintain its viability. Further consequences of the changing nature of this school's intake will be examined in the section on the social aspects of parental choice.

NNC4's recourse to importing pupils from Old Northwick supports the thesis that schools in better-off areas may be skimming pupils from more deprived catchments. The other New Northwick comprehensives also made significant imports from Old Northwick catchments, ranging from 10-20% of their intake. Table 6.2.5 shows mean figures for flows from areas to specific school types. Between 1991 and 1995 there is a consistent increase in the number of children transferring from Old Northwick catchments to New Northwick comprehensives, from 12% of Old Northwick exports in 1991 to 16% in 1995. This apparent support for the 'cream-skimming' thesis is, though, highly dependent on demographics, in particular on NNC4's deficit between intake and Planned Admissions Limits. This aspect will be more fully covered in section 6.4.

Home catchment location for pupil exports				
Destination school type	Rural comprehensive	New Northwick comprehensive	Old Northwick comprehensive	Total
Denominational	10	15	201	225
Grammar	39	43	187	269
Rural comprehensive	4	3	25	32
New Northwick comp,	15	163	146	324
Old Northwick comp.	2	4	441	447
Total	70	227	999	1296

Table 6.2.5 - Mean 1991-1995 pupil flows

Old Northwick displays much greater variability than the other two areas in patterns of catchment flow. Consideration will first be given to what characterises the destinations of exports from catchments that experience high losses.

All high-loss catchments export large numbers to neighbouring catchments. Most are also exporting over 20% of their population to grammar and denominational schools. There are two exceptions. The first is ONC3, which is geographically isolated, a long way from the denominational schools and with a highly socio-economically deprived population unlikely to secure many grammar school places.

The other exception is ONC6, which exports only about 13% of its catchment to grammars and denominational schools. It does, however, export more than a quarter of its children to New Northwick comprehensives, three times the rate of the next highest exporter to this part of the city. It seems that once parents have decided against the local comprehensive, the choice of an alternative is dependent on a number of contextual factors. Poverty and geography in ONC3's catchment may limit many parents to a single alternative secondary school - ONC8. Good transport links for parents in ONC6's catchment may make comprehensive schools in attractive middle-class areas with good league table results easily accessible. The importance of contextual factors such as these will be considered in rest of the chapter.

6.2.7 Satisfaction of parental preferences.

The final aspect of choice considered in this section is the extent to which parental preferences are satisfied. With the data available to the LEA, this can only be measured by calculating the proportion of parents whose child secures a first preference secondary school place. Such a statistic does, of course, ignore those parents who would ideally have preferred an alternative school to their first preference, but anticipated that they might not

fulfil the over-subscription criteria and therefore accepted a 'second-best' choice. The extent of such tactical choices is investigated in the parental survey.

Overall, parental satisfaction appears high, varying between 91.3% and 93.1% of parents in the study period obtaining their first choice, with no particular trends in overall satisfaction evident (Table 6.2.6). The high satisfaction rates apparent in rural catchments, with less than 2.5% failing to gain their first choice, could be attributed to the lack of a realistic alternative. However, the percentage of first preferences satisfied in New Northwick is almost as high and there certainly are practical alternatives available to these parents.

Satisfaction levels appear much lower in Old Northwick where 10% of parents fail to secure their first choice. Over the whole study period, dissatisfied parents are divided roughly 50-50 between failed 11-plus examinations and over-subscribed comprehensive schools. Examination of the second part of Table 6.2.6 reveals, though, that there is a distinct trend with an increasing percentage of parents failing to secure the comprehensive of their choice. The percentage failing to secure a grammar school place may still be much higher, but in 1995, 134 parents were unable to gain a place for their child at a first-choice comprehensive compared with 121 11-plus failures. In 1991, 249 children failed the 11-plus and only 61 children were unable to secure a place at their preferred comprehensive. Rising rolls are likely to lead to a further reduction in the number of places in popular schools available to out-of-catchment children. The increased levels of dissatisfaction likely to follow may lead to an growing realisation by parents that the ability to express any preference for a particular secondary school place is very different to the right to a place at that school.

	1991	1993	1994	1995
Location				
Rural	97.5	97.9	98.6	98.2
New Northwick	95.5	97.3	95.3	96.8
Old Northwick	87.9	90.3	88.9	89.8
School type				
Comprehensive	2.0	3.5	4.3	4.5
Grammar	53.7	36.0	35.4	30.0
Denominational	5.5	6.0	9.8	1.8
Overall	91.3	93.1	92.0	92.8

Table 6.2.6 - % of parents securing 1st preference school

6.2.8 Conclusion.

The answers to the questions posed at the start of this section are briefly summarised here:

- Out-of-catchment movement is highly significant in Eastland. Nearly half of Old Northwick children ‘reject’ the local comprehensive compared with a third of those in New Northwick and even rural catchments export about a tenth of their year-6 children.
- Comparison of catchment import and export levels shows that some schools are clearly doing better than others, with schools in the more deprived parts of Old Northwick generally the biggest net ‘losers’ of pupils. However, there is no clear relationship between gains and losses and some schools are characterised by high levels of movement in both directions.
- There has been a steady increase in catchment permeability in the study period supporting the hypothesis that liberalised parental choice legislation is leading to a weakening of the relationship between schools and their local catchments.
- This steady increase in movement out-of-catchment at the highest aggregate level is not necessarily replicated for individual schools. Temporal variability

in import and export rates may make planning difficult for schools and the LEA, while uncertainty over their likelihood of satisfying over-subscription criteria can be problematic for parents.

- Location appears to be a highly significant factor in choice of alternatives to the local comprehensive. Rural exports are predominantly travelling to grammar schools. New Northwick also sends a small number of pupils to grammar schools but the destination of the great majority of its exports is a comprehensive school in the same neighbourhood and such choices can scarcely be described as substantive out-of-catchment moves. Out-of-catchment transfers from Old Northwick are far more diverse, with children received in sizeable numbers by neighbouring comprehensives, New Northwick comprehensives, grammar and denominational schools.
- Throughout the study between 91% and 93% of parents succeed in gaining their first preference secondary school for their child. Few rural parents fail to secure their first choice, whilst children in Old Northwick are twice as likely to attend a second choice school as those in New Northwick. Although the percentage of parents failing to achieve the stated first preference is fairly consistent, there is a major change in the study period. In 1991 about 80% of children failing to secure their first preference were 11-plus failures. In 1995 this figure had dropped below 50% and most children failed to secure a first preference because a desired comprehensive was over-subscribed.

The patterns of movement revealed in the preceding analysis beg more questions than they answer. The rest of this chapter evaluates a variety of possible explanations for these

patterns, both temporal and spatial, starting with a consideration of the importance of spatial influences on choice.

6.3 Shape and size of catchments.

It is well established that the distance a child lives from a school is a major determinant of the likelihood of their choosing that school. However, transfer procedures that give residence in a catchment a higher priority than home-school distance in deciding between applicants to over-subscribed schools, potentially over-ride parents' preference for an otherwise convenient school. This section examines the interaction between catchment size and shape, distance from home-to-school and parental preference as factors in increasing catchment exports. The questions are:

- Does the upward trend in out-of-catchment movement reflect the willingness of parents for their children to travel further to gain a place at a suitable school?
- Alternatively, are parents increasingly choosing the nearest school regardless of catchment?
- To what extent are the children of parents living close to a catchment boundary more likely to send their children to an out-of-catchment school?
- In small, or long and thin, catchments a high proportion of parents may live close to the catchment boundary. Are catchments of this shape more permeable than those with a greater approximation to circularity?

Each of these questions is now considered in turn.

6.3.1 Length of home-to-school journey.

The range of choice of secondary schools available to a parent is obviously limited by the distance they are prepared for their children to travel to school. Home-secondary school

journeys in Eastland are characterised by the expected distance-decay curve (Figure 6.3.1). While some children are travelling very long distances to school (8% travel over 10 km.), the majority travel less than 1.5 km.

Longitudinal analysis reveals that pupils are indeed travelling further to school, the median distance for all Eastland pupils rising from 1.36 km. in 1991 to 1.44 km. in 1995 (Table 6.3.1). It is noteworthy that the change in the upper quartile figure is proportionately much greater than that for the lower quartile. It seems that much of the increase in mean home-school distances is explained by a relatively small number of longer journeys both within Northwick and across the urban boundary. It seems that some parents are making very active use of parental choice and are choosing schools well beyond those in the home and adjacent catchments. An example is the 13 pupils in 1995 travelling across the city’s longest diagonal, traversing four other catchments in the journey from ONC9’s catchment to NNC4. The availability of a public bus-route between these two areas makes such a journey possible, emphasising the potential role of transport in creating extended *de facto* catchments for schools.

	1991	1993	1994	1995
Mean distance	2.78	2.86	2.94	3.15
Lower quartile	0.80	0.81	0.81	0.82
Upper quartile	3.18	3.33	3.52	3.89
Median distances				
All pupils	1.36	1.40	1.43	1.44
Rural schools	5.20	4.00	4.56	5.39
New Northwick schools	1.13	1.36	1.30	1.43
Old Northwick	1.00	1.06	1.02	1.03
comprehensives				
Grammar schools	4.30	5.40	5.73	4.89
Denominational schools	3.36	3.14	3.26	3.49

Table 6.3.1 - Distance (km.) from 1995 year-6 pupils’ homes to secondary school attended

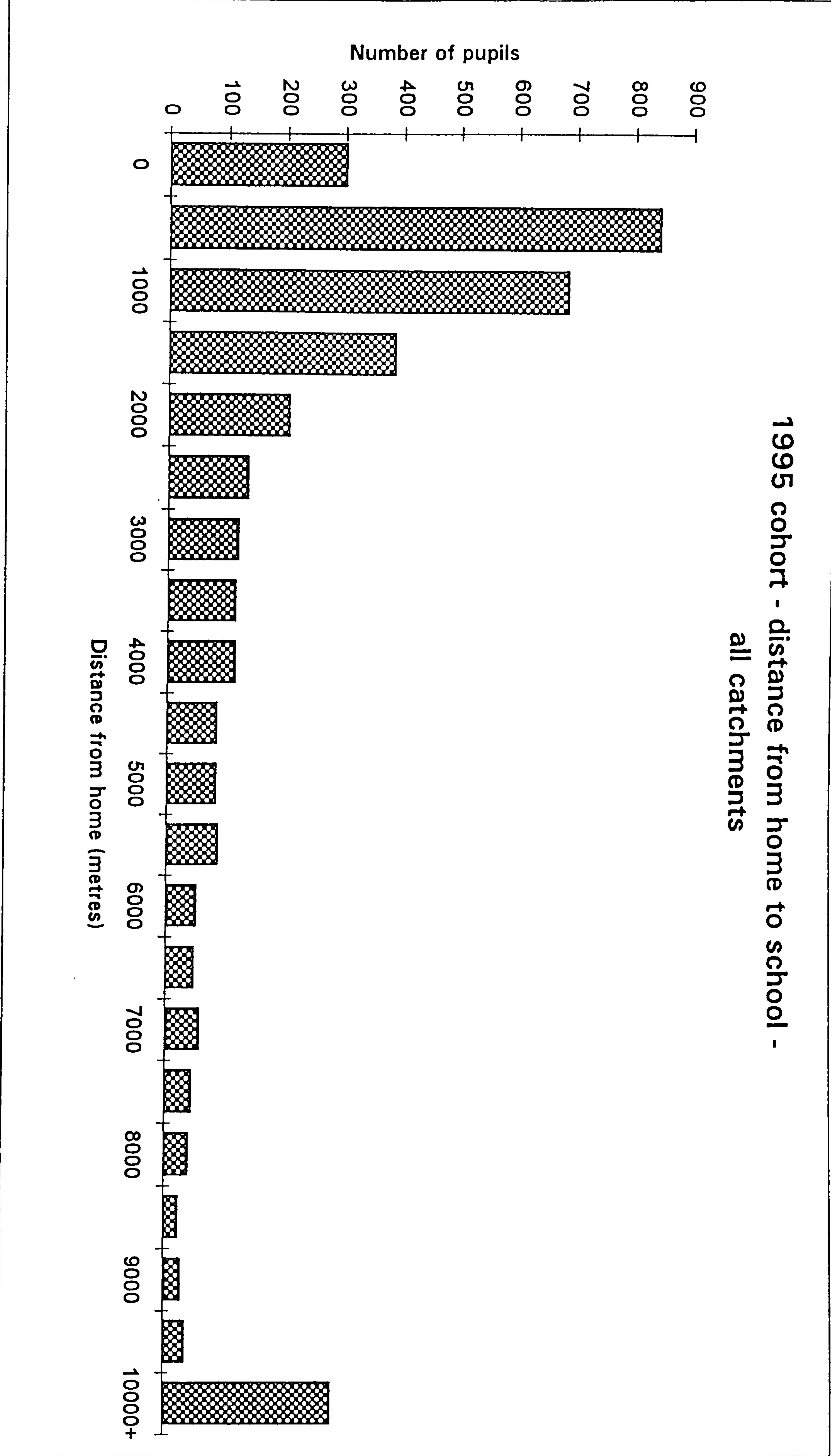


Figure 6.3.1 Home-school distance - all catchments

Such long journeys are, however, the exception for urban comprehensive pupils. Children are travelling three or four times further to rural, denominational and grammar schools (median journeys between 3.5 km. and 5 km.) compared with urban comprehensives (see Figure 6.3.1). Rural children generally have no option but to make journeys of this length. For those attending grammar and denominational schools, though, the distance travelled indicates that these schools are certainly not chosen for reasons of convenience and may well represent a clear preference over the local comprehensive alternative. The spatial and social characteristics of grammar and denominational school intakes are considered further in the section on educational factors in choice.

In summary, the overall trend in home-to-school distance for year-7 pupils is consistently upwards. However, when the data are dis-aggregated to the school-level, as shown in Table 6.3.1, median home-school distances often fall in a particular year. This is a result of changing patterns in school attendance - increased journey lengths in some parts of Eastland are partly balanced by reductions elsewhere, as schools vary in popularity.

Choice of an out-of-catchment school certainly involves children in a significant degree of extra travel. In 1995 the mean home-school journey for non-movers was 0.99 km. compared with 3.28 km. for catchment exports. As an aside, such figures imply potentially severe implications for traffic congestion if out-of-catchment movement continues to increase. The distance parents are willing to send their children to school may well explain at least one of the instances of a catchment experiencing a high level of pupil movements in both directions across its borders. ONC8 exports, on average, 187 pupils, suggesting a high degree of parental dissatisfaction with the local school, yet at the same time, it imports about eighty pupils from elsewhere. In fact, two thirds of these imports are from ONC3 - the last school to convert from secondary modern to comprehensive status and located in the most deprived part of the city. This school only has a catchment boundary with ONC8

so that any parents seeking an alternative must commit their children to a significant (and costly) journey if they choose any alternative besides their neighbour. For many parents the dictates of distance and cost mean that they are making relative choices between schools that are accessible rather than absolute choices between all schools in the system. This issue is addressed further in the survey of parents.

6.3.2 Another school nearer than catchment comprehensive.

Northwick's current secondary school catchment boundaries crystallised in the late 1980s after an evolution that sometimes owed more to political expediency than rational planning. Though accessibility was an important element, they were certainly not designed so that parents automatically lived in the catchment of the nearest comprehensive. It is possible that, although year-6 exports generally travel further than non-movers, liberalised parental choice is allowing some parents to choose a more convenient school than their catchment comprehensive. This would mean that at least part of the increase in inter-catchment movements reflects an increase in attendance at the 'true' local school rather than the growth in the active selection of more distant alternatives that has been predicted.

There is clearly some scope for such a process. In 1995 19% of all Eastland pupils lived closer to another comprehensive than their catchment secondary school. However, of these children, 43% stay in their defined catchment, 34% choose another school altogether and only 23% select this closer school. When these pupil flows are examined more closely, several examples are found where approximately a third of the pupils in this situation are choosing the closer school. In every case, the receiving school is generally considered to have a better reputation than the catchment school so that these movements are more likely to be about active choice on grounds other than convenience. Few parents are choosing comprehensive schools that are closer than their catchment school *when the closer school does not have a better reputation*. This runs counter to the hypothesis that there has been an

significant increase in the proportion making choices purely on grounds of convenience - selecting a non-catchment school just because it is closer. Such a comment has to be qualified, though with the recognition that home-school distance alone cannot act as a satisfactory surrogate measure for convenience as other factors such as transport and physical barriers may be of relevance. It is only by talking to the parents themselves that such issues can be more fully evaluated.

6.3.3 Children living close to catchment boundaries.

If distance to school is a significant predictor of choice, then parents living close to catchment boundaries are more likely to reject the catchment comprehensive. The catchment comprehensive is less likely to be their ‘local’ school and they are more likely to be mixing with people who have associations with schools in neighbouring catchments. Here, it is possible to examine the degree to which any increase in catchment losses is made up of parents living close to the catchment boundary rather than those living more centrally. If this was the case, then the increase in outflows may simply reflect the fact that, rather than a generalised increase in the proportion of parents rejecting the local comprehensive, parents are simply finding it easier to select the local school that they consider most convenient for their children.

In line with expectations, the average distance from pupils’ homes to the catchment boundary is smaller, and the average distance to the nearest comprehensive larger, for children choosing out-of-catchment schools (Table 6.3.2), though the differences are not great.

	To nearest school	To catchment school	To catchment boundary
‘Non-movers’	0.93 km.	0.98 km.	0.41 km.
‘Exports’	1.08 km.	1.21 km.	0.35 km.

Table 6.3.2 - Mean distance from home to local school and catchment boundary - ‘exports’ and ‘non-movers’

Parents living very close to the catchment boundary are, though, much more likely to choose an out-of-catchment school. 55% of children within 200 m. of the boundary are exports compared with 34% living closer to the centre of the catchment. It does, therefore, appear that parents who live closest to centre of the catchment will need a significantly greater incentive to reject the local comprehensive than those on the margins of the catchment. This may not necessarily, however, just relate to convenience. Parents living on catchment boundaries may be less likely to reflect the dominant social grouping of a catchment, compared with those in the centre, whilst transport routes to other catchments may be more accessible on the periphery.

Change in the relative importance of convenience in choice can be explored through a comparison of export rates in the study period for parents in the 200m buffer with the rest of the parent population. Use of a 200m buffer to represent those parents living close to a catchment boundary is partly arbitrary, but has been specifically chosen for a reason that arises from the discussion of the accuracy of postcodes in the previous chapter. Raper *et al* (1992) found that 97% of home postcodes were within 200m of their notional grid reference. Therefore, it is fairly certain that if pupils whose postcodes link to grid-references lying within 200m of the catchment boundary are excluded, then the quality of the analysis is not degraded by the attribution of pupils to the incorrect catchment. Thus, any trends revealed in catchment permeability are true reflections of the importance of catchments. When it comes to any trend revealed for parents allocated to the 200m buffer, it is impossible to determine the relative contributions of a real buffer effect and the locational fuzziness inherent in the method used to geo-reference children's' homes. The accuracy of the allocations was checked in the social survey.

Export rates from either side of the 200m buffer for the 1995 cohort are displayed in Table 6.3.3 with the percentage of exports for all children in the catchment in the third column. It

can be seen from this table that, for a truly isolated rural catchment, such as RC2, there is no 'border effect'. Conversely, rural catchments bordering urban areas lose a high proportion of their catchments from a buffer that is very narrow in relation to the size of the catchment. For the other catchments, the difference between percentage losses from the buffer and the centre of the catchment varies between 7 and 22% with the exception of ONC1 whose catchment is so thin that it is almost all 'buffer'.

Catchment	% exports from homes < 200m buffer	% exports from homes > 200m buffer	% exports from all homes
NNC1	50	35	39
NNC2	49	32	36
NNC3	31	18	22
NNC4	59	50	51
ONC1	38	38	38
ONC2	66	54	58
ONC3	85	66	72
ONC4	33	16	22
ONC5	57	35	36
ONC6	60	52	54
ONC7	60	38	46
ONC8	63	56	58
ONC9	53	43	45
RC1	55	15	16
RC2	-	4	15
RC3	100	12	4

Table 6.3.3 - Comparison of percentages of 1991-1995 cohort exports either side of 200m catchment boundary buffer

The export figures for the 1991 to 1995 cohorts, excluding pupils with homes 'inside' the 200m. buffer, presented in Table 6.3.4 show that the trend in increasing leakage of pupils from catchments remains even when parents living in the buffer zone are excluded. Indeed, the percentage increase is actually greater for parents living in the core of the catchment, which may indicate that convenience is becoming less important as a factor for parents in choice.

	1991	1993	1994	1995
Excluding children living within buffer	27	29	30	34
Children living within buffer only	53	53	52	55
All children	33	34	35	39

Table 6.3.4 - Percentage losses from catchments - with and without pupils inside 200m buffer around catchment boundary

6.3.4 Catchment size and shape.

Given this differential rate of export between core and periphery, a small catchment would generally be expected to be much more permeable because of the greater proportion of parents living close to the border. When catchment size is correlated with export rate the Spearman's coefficient of -0.37 is almost significant ($p=0.08$). However, for rural parents it is surely the sheer distance to alternatives, rather the proportion of parents living away from the immediate vicinity of the catchment school that is the critical factor. When rural schools are excluded, then the Spearman's coefficient is actually positive, though statistically insignificant (0.18, $p=0.28$). Within Northwick only ONC1's catchment is noticeably smaller than the others and this catchment actually has a lower export rate than almost any other in Old Northwick. It may be that if large comprehensives are unpopular with a sufficient number of parents, such a small catchment (in population as well as size) may actually be a favourable factor in pupil recruitment.

The possibility that catchment shape may be a significant determinant of parental choice of secondary school is the final spatial factor to be explored. The reasoning behind this hypothesis is that the majority of parents in 'long thin' catchments will be near the catchment boundary and other schools and parents with children at those schools. In contrast, parents living in catchments that approximate to circularity will be much more likely to be in the 'sphere of influence' of the catchment school. A simple index of shape is derived by dividing the area of a catchment with the area of a circle drawn through the catchment's longest axis (Unwin, 1981).

The lack of a strong relationship between catchment shape and the level of pupil movements is shown by correlation of the percentage of exports from a catchment with its shape index; this produces a statistically insignificant Spearman's coefficient of 0.029 ($p=0.46$). In urban areas, where catchment shape might be expected to be important, its

influence is probably overshadowed by other factors such as transport, socio-economic characteristics and perceived educational quality. As with catchment size, the hypothesis is particularly confounded by the fact that the school whose catchment has the highest length/breadth ratio, by a considerable margin, is ONC1, which manages to retain most of the pupils in its catchment despite its supposed spatial disadvantage.

Permeability can work two ways, of course. Given the apparent popularity of this school, then, the catchment shape may contribute to the high level of imports, as a large population of children in other catchments is living within easy travelling distance of the school. Overall, though, there is insufficient variation in catchment shape in the case-study area for a useful analysis of its importance for parental choice.

6.3.5 Conclusion.

Spatial factors do play a role in choice, but they can vary considerably depending on the context.

- The distance children travel to secondary school is increasing in line with the rising trend in catchment export rates.
- Most lengthy journeys are to grammar or denominational schools. Parents who favour these schools appear prepared to sacrifice convenience to a far greater extent than those who choose comprehensives.
- There is a notable increase in the number of children travelling long distances from Old Northwick catchments to New Northwick or rural comprehensives.
- A significant number of parents live closer to a comprehensive other than their catchment school, but this does not appear to be a significant explanatory factor in the increased expression of choice.

- The increase in exports does represent an increase in the rejection of the local comprehensive school, whether that school is defined as the nearest school or the catchment school.
- Parents living on catchment boundaries are much more likely to choose an out-of-catchment school than those living in the centre, but the extent to which this occurs may depend on the attractiveness of the local school and the socio-economic characteristics of the alternative catchment populations. Such factors, together with the general homogeneity of catchment shape, are presumably responsible for the absence of substantial relationships between catchment size, shape and levels of catchment losses.

6.4 Demographic factors.

The relationship between school capacities and catchment populations is a potentially vital factor in out-of-catchment movement. The large differences between many Old Northwick catchment populations and schools' Planned Admissions Limits (PALs) were discussed in Chapter Four. An important issue to address is the extent to which out-of-catchment movement merely represents the export of pupils who are surplus to the capacity of the school. Although there was little overall change in numbers transferring to secondary school in the study period (see Table 4.1), there may have been significant variation at the scale of the catchment. If that is the case, any increase in inter-catchment flows may reflect reduced capacity in particular schools and be unrelated to any real increase in active use of parental choice. Alternatively, these population disparities may represent the continuation of the old selective system in parts of Northwick, with the surpluses travelling to grammar or, perhaps, denominational schools.

The following questions are posed in this section:

- What contribution do the large excesses of catchment capacity over comprehensive school population make to the overall level of pupil exports?
- How much does out-of-catchment movement reflect the spatial dynamics of the old selective system?

6.4.1 Flows related to catchment population/PAL discrepancies.

There are surpluses of catchment population over PAL of a hundred or more in some cases with corresponding deficits elsewhere that are almost as great (Figure 6.4.1). Superficially, it appears as if parents in ‘surplus’ catchments are forced to choose schools in ‘deficit’ catchments. Such a constraint of the ability of parents to choose the local school could be considered a valid criticism of particular catchment designs, as well as being highly likely to be the source of local controversy.

Whilst surpluses of school capacities over catchment populations may be considered an inefficient use of resources, they do provide both parents and the LEA with room to manoeuvre. Changing demographics do not require immediate changes in school capacities, while parents are more likely to gain a place in their local catchment should a first preference elsewhere be unsuccessful. Catchment populations above school intake limits, on the other hand, may leave parents living within the catchment unable to secure a place for their child in the first round of preferences.

However, examination of the data reveals that no parent is forced to choose an out-of-catchment-school in the first round. In every catchment with a surplus of population over PAL the number of parents expressing a preference for an out-of-catchment school at this stage is greater than the surplus, reflecting the fact that these schools tend to be in the more deprived areas. In fact, there is a positive, statistically significant Spearman’s Rank correlation of 0.57 ($p = 0.02$) between the catchment export rate and the excess of PAL

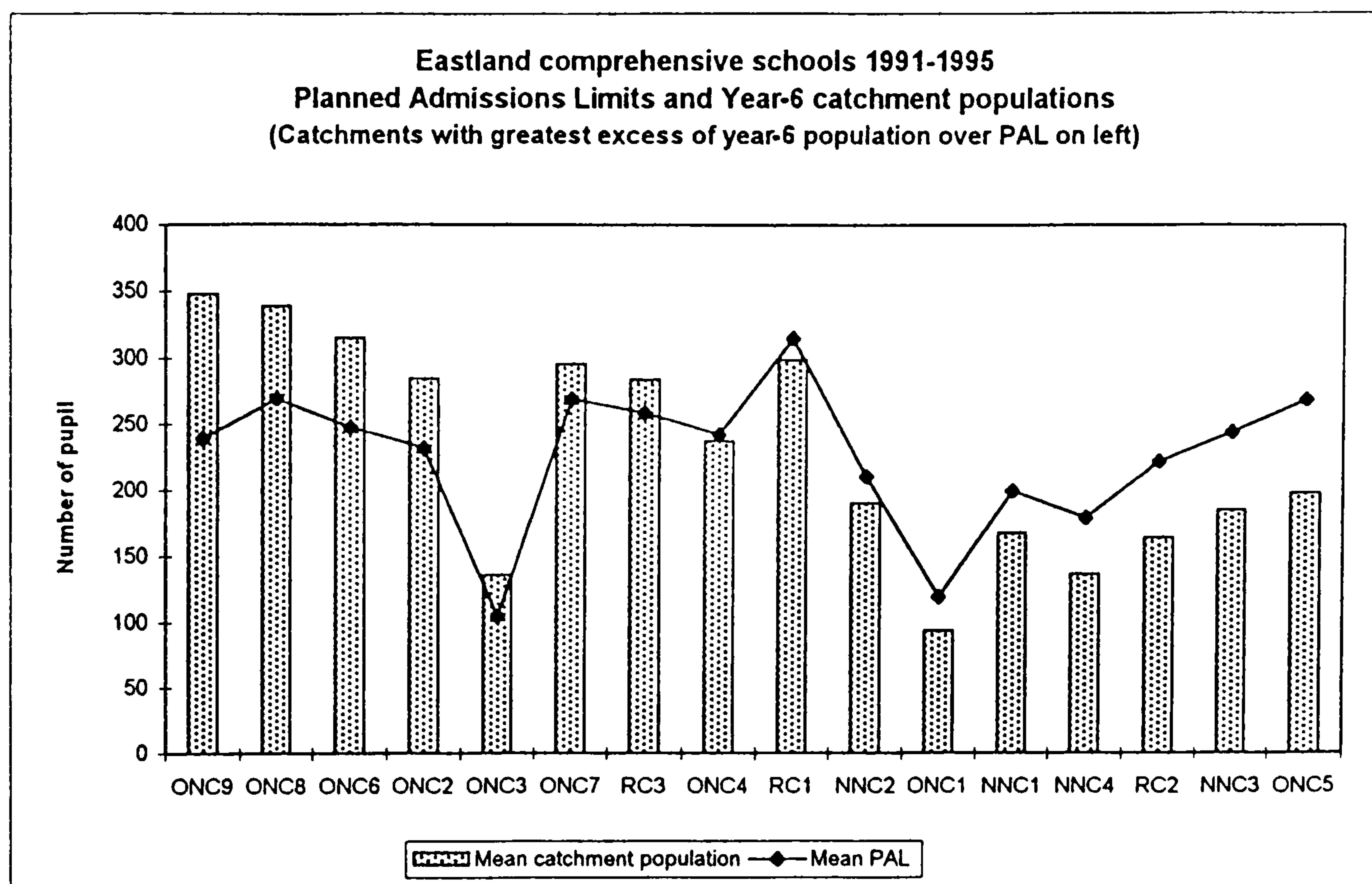


Figure 6.4.1 Eastland school PALs and year-6 catchment populations

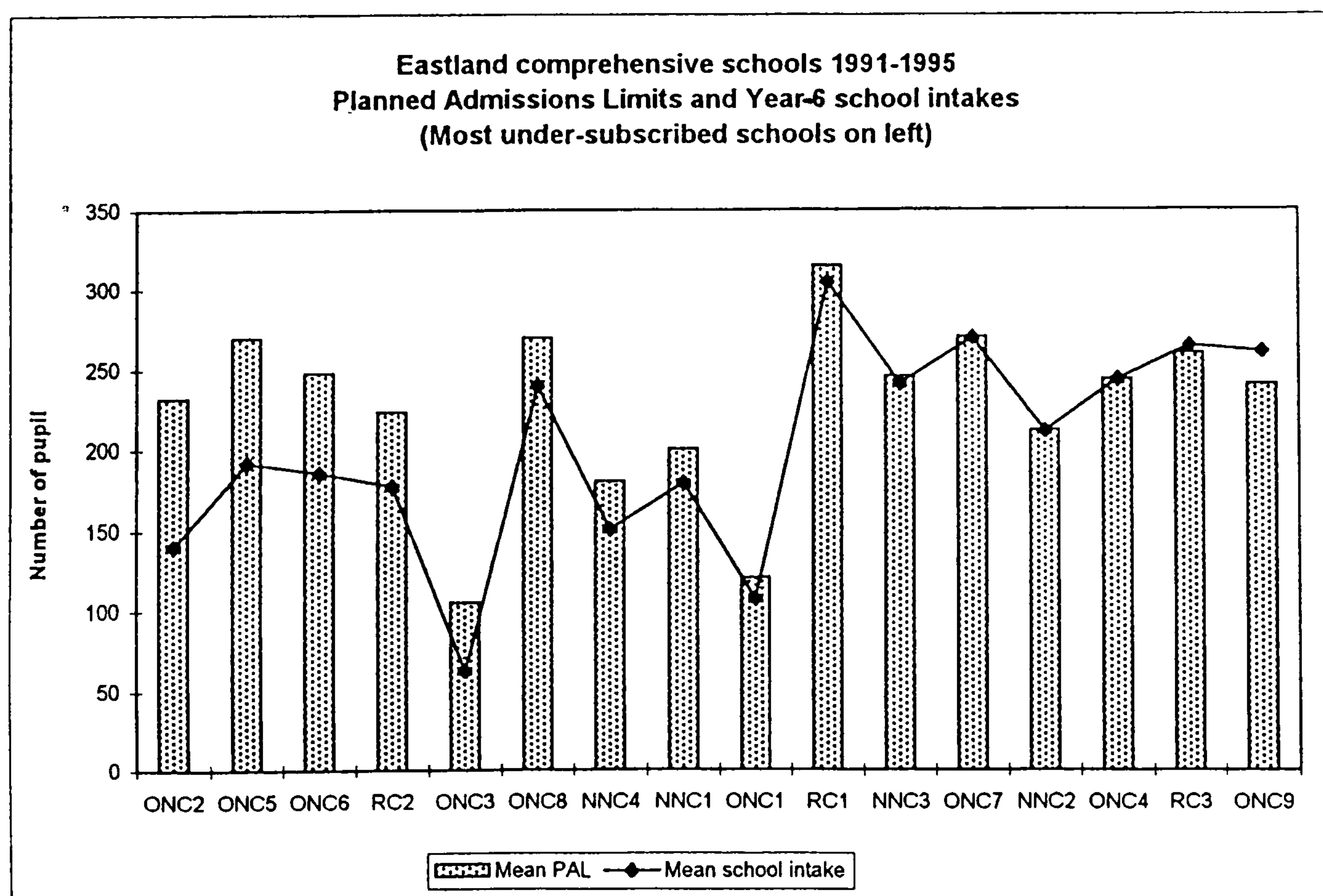


Figure 6.4.2 Eastland schools PALs and year-6 intakes

over the catchment population. Therefore, all out-of-catchment moves imply rejection of the local comprehensive, in the first round at least. Assuming that parents are aware of this fact (and the extent of that awareness is an issue to be investigated in the parental survey), then the disparity between PAL and catchment population plays no part in parents' initial decisions. Indeed, the catchment design seems simply to reflect the reality of flows of children from the less affluent catchments to New Northwick, the grammar and the denominational schools.

These demographics do, though, appear to play a major role in deciding which school many children finally attend. When all year-6 pupils have been allocated to a secondary school, many comprehensives have large shortfalls in intake compared to capacity (Figure 6.4.2). Often, these are the same catchments that have large excesses of catchment population over PAL. Given that these demographics are predictable (and on the whole they are), parents in such catchments have nothing to lose by trying for a popular alternative to the catchment comprehensive or the 11-plus, as the local school will still be available if their gamble fails. Parents living in the catchments of the half dozen or so schools liable to be over-subscribed in the first round of preference expression, in contrast, have more to fear should they fail to achieve their preference. They will be able to choose neither the local school nor an alternative popular school (since popular schools are likely to be over-subscribed) and therefore may feel forced to select the local school for fear of something worse.

There is no upper limit to grammar school capacities because of the LEA policy of guaranteeing a grammar school place for every child that passes the 11-plus. However, predicting which of the other schools will be over-subscribed in the first round of preference selection is not necessarily simple. Only ONC4 was over-subscribed in every

year from 1991 to 1995 (Table 6.4.1). Variations in the popularity of particular schools inevitably make the results of the choice of some parents something of a gamble.

School	1991	1993	1994	1995
D1	Y		Y	Y
D2	Y	Y		
NNC1				Y
NNC2	Y		Y	
NNC3		Y		Y
ONC4	Y	Y	Y	Y
ONC7		Y		
ONC8		Y	Y	
RC3		Y	Y	
Total comprehensives oversubscribed	2	5	4	3

Table 6.4.1 - Secondary schools oversubscribed in the 1st round of preference expression

If catchments in the less affluent areas with large year-6 pupil excesses provide inputs to the system, then schools in New Northwick, with deficits to make up, provide a potential outlet for these flows. When the popularity of a school with a declining year-6 catchment population, such as NNC4 declines in comparison with its neighbour (NNC3) the consequent outflow of pupils increases the deficit that has to be compensated if pupil numbers are to be maintained. As a result, the school becomes even more reliant on securing pupils from the ‘exporting catchments’ in Old Northwick. The impact of this process on the social characteristics of the school’s intake are examined later, whilst the interaction between demographics and choice is explored further in the section on procedural factors.

6.4.2 The persistence of the old selective system.

Chapter Four outlined the transformation in Old Northwick from the old fully selective system to the current hybrid state. Comprehensive schools predominate but three grammar schools remain. Movement out-of-catchment might represent a continuation of the old system with the surplus of catchment population over PAL made up of those local pupils

taking the grammar (or denominational) school option. In that case, many Old Northwick comprehensives would, in effect, remain secondary moderns.

There is some evidence that this is true. Even the Old Northwick catchments that retain most pupils, ONC4 and ONC5, lose over half of their exports to grammar and denominational schools (Figure 6.4.3). Other Old Northwick catchments export larger absolute numbers of pupils to grammar and denominational schools than these two schools. However, the Old Northwick catchments containing the less popular comprehensive schools export even greater numbers of pupils to other comprehensive schools. The majority of these exports are either to schools in neighbouring catchments or to New Northwick schools. It seems that fluidity in the system would be high without grammar and denominational schools. However, the presence of grammar and denominational schools in the system undoubtedly influences pupil-flows between comprehensive catchments. There is a closer analysis of the impact of grammar and denominational schools on patterns of parental choice later in this chapter.

6.4.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, demographics do have a significant role in the translation of parental preference into actual pupil movements.

- No child is forced to attend a school outside their local catchment, though a lot of Old Northwick parents would be if their local schools increased significantly in popularity. However, as these tend to be schools in more deprived neighbourhoods, the type forecast to do worst out of parental choice, this is unlikely.

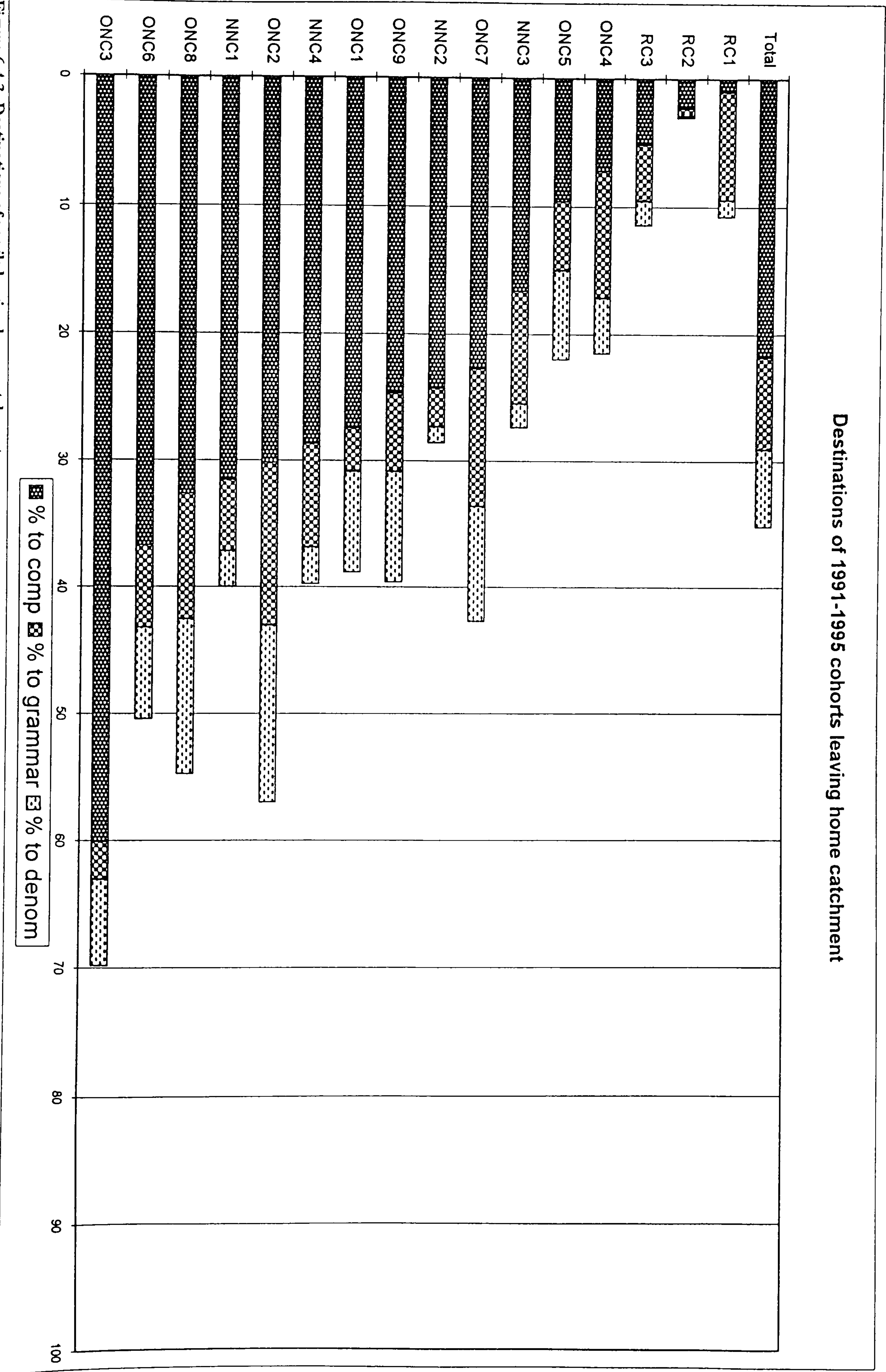


Figure 6.4.3 Destinations of pupils leaving home catchment

- On the other hand, demographics must play a part in parents' tactical use of parental choice. Parents in popular catchments, likely to be over-subscribed in the first round of preference expression, may have to make a safety-first choice.
- Whilst only two or three comprehensives are over-subscribed each year, because of the unpredictability in the system, over-subscription is a reasonable possibility in perhaps a third of Eastland catchments. Parents in these catchments face the real possibility of losing a 'second-best' option if they fail to gain a place at their preferred school.
- Paradoxically, parents of children in most of the catchments with big excesses of pupils over PAL in Old Northwick have nothing to lose by choosing elsewhere in the first round of preference expression. These catchment surpluses reflect the relative unpopularity of most Old Northwick comprehensives.
- Increased rolls, however, without corresponding increases in capacity for the more popular schools, would increase the number of over-subscribed schools and many more parents would be forced to accept places at the less popular comprehensives.
- The large excesses and deficits between catchment populations and school capacities do, to some extent, reflect the old selective system, with a significant proportion of the pupil surpluses exported to grammar and denominational schools. However, even in the urban catchments exporting most to these schools, the number of transfers to other comprehensives is high.

Though demographics superficially appear to be an important factor in parental choice, closer examination reveals their true influence to be relatively small. The discussion now proceeds to a consideration of the educational and social factors considered by commentators in all parts of the political spectrum to be profoundly involved in the way parents choose.

6.5 Educational Factors.

Many advocates of parental choice claim that educational factors are the most important ingredient in the selection of a school and that improvement in the quality of secondary education will be the greatest benefit of an increase in the expression of choice. Any empirical analysis of the operation of parental choice needs to include a consideration of the significance of the various schools' educational quality as a factor in generating inter-catchment flows. Unfortunately, the quantitative measures of educational quality generally used in the secondary school selection process are both narrow and misleading. Parents are primarily expected to make their decisions on the basis of 'league tables' of examination results that are widely disseminated by the press and in schools' own promotional literature.

However, the link between pupils' socio-economic background and schools' academic performance, discussed in Chapter Three, renders such tables of limited value as a means of assessing a school's true educational quality (even assuming that the desired educational outcome could be defined purely in terms of examination results). Evaluating the educational effectiveness of schools is problematic without access to individual-level data on pupils that includes their social background and their entry-level standard. Nevertheless, an attempt can be made to assess the extent to which parental choices are influenced by schools' positions in the league tables. This section also considers issues that are influenced, though certainly not entirely characterised, by educational criteria - choice of

grammar and denominational school and gender differences in out-of-catchment movement.

Three main questions are posed:

- Do parents tend to choose out-of-catchment schools that do well in examination league tables?
- What sort of catchments do children choosing grammar and denominational schools come from?
- Single-sex girls' schools are often seen as educationally preferable - if gender differentiated export rates are identified can they be explained by this factor?

6.5.1 Choice of school related to league tables.

Intuitively, one might expect that the schools with the highest import rates would boast the best GCSE results. The league table for 1994 is presented in Table 6.5.1 together with schools' import and export rates. This table reveals a tri-modal distribution. Heading the table, between 89% and 99% of grammar school pupils gained at least 5 GCSEs at grade C or above. At the bottom, eight Old Northwick comprehensive score below 28%, whilst in the middle, ONC4, the four New Northwick comprehensives and both denominational schools all register between 45% and 61%. Gaining a place at a grammar school can be seen as a virtual guarantee of academic success for a child, whereas at most Old Northwick comprehensive schools only a small minority of pupils will be 'academic high-fliers'. The other schools would appear to recruit a much more educationally mixed intake. In particular, the results of the denominational schools put them on a par, educationally, with a good comprehensive.

The expectation of a negative relationship between catchment export rates and the proportion of children in a comprehensive school securing 5 or more GCSEs at grade C and above is confirmed with a statistically significant Spearman's coefficient of -0.56 (p=0.024). However, there is no significant positive relationship between the percentage of imports for each catchment comprehensive and this measure of educational success. It seems that schools with lower levels of examination success (in simple numeric terms) are more likely to lose pupils from their catchment. On the other hand, schools with better GCSE results do not necessarily boast correspondingly high import rates.

School	5+ GCSEs*	Export rate**	Import rate***
G1	99		
G2	97		
G3	89		
NNC2	61	29	35
NNC4	54	40	45
RC2	53	3	10
RC3	53	11	5
NNC3	51	27	44
D2	50		
NNC1	50	40	44
ONC4	48	22	23
RC1	48	11	12
D1	45		
ONC6	28	50	16
ONC5	27	22	19
ONC7	24	43	37
ONC8	21	55	34
ONC2	17	57	13
ONC9	15	40	22
ONC1	6	39	46
ONC3	0	70	34

Table 6.5.1 - School GCSE results 1994

* % pupils gaining 5 or more GCSEs grade C or above

** % pupils with homes in catchment attending out-of-catchment secondary school

*** % pupils attending catchment comprehensive with homes outside catchment

The lack of a relationship between import levels and GCSE successes is at least partly explained by the previously noted point - popular schools do not necessarily have high import rates as most places may be taken up by children from the local catchment.

Nevertheless, the complete absence of a relationship is surprising and other factors undoubtedly contribute to this situation. As has been demonstrated, there are a number of local moves between New Northwick catchments, where there is little difference between schools' examination results. Indeed, in the case of NNC3 and NNC4 the majority of inter-catchment movement is in the direction of the school that scores 3% less in the league table. Similarly a considerable number of moves in Old Northwick appear unrelated to schools' league table position. ONC1 is second bottom in the league table, yet retains most of its catchment whilst attracting a number of children from elsewhere. Clearly other factors, such as the school's small size, are outweighing the narrowly defined educational consideration of examination success. Additionally, grammar schools, having no *de jure* catchment, are excluded from this analysis and those parents most motivated by academic criteria might be expected to favour this option.

Other information about a school's quality is available, notably OFSTED reports, but here again the evidence is sometimes against educational quality as a key factor in choice. ONC6 gained an excellent OFSTED report but this has failed to stem the loss of pupils to the New Northwick comprehensives. Even good quality teaching is insufficient to raise the GCSE performance of this school's intake to the level achieved by the New Northwick schools whose pupils tend to come from much more educationally advantaged backgrounds. This continuing disparity in perceived educational performance, together with the availability of convenient bus services from ONC6's inner-city location to the attractive suburban environment of the New Northwick comprehensives, creates an adverse set of circumstances that educational quality alone may be insufficient to counteract.

In any case, it is impossible to disentangle the educational reasons for choice from those more concerned with social status in this analysis. The well-documented link between a school's exam success and the socio-economic background of its intake is supported by a

statistically significant Spearman's coefficient of 0.87 ($p=0.00$) which is produced when the mean Townsend deprivation index of the home postcode of the 1995 intake for each comprehensive school is correlated with the percentage of pupils gaining five or more GCSEs at C or above. When the mean Townsend Index for catchment populations is correlated with GCSE success rates the coefficient is 0.9 ($p=0.00$). The relationship between the social characteristics of catchments and choice is examined further in the following section. First, the geography of grammar and denominational school intakes is considered.

6.5.2 Grammar and denominational schools.

New Northwick might be expected to export a higher proportion of children to grammar schools than Old Northwick. The more affluent families living there would be expected to provide greater numbers of 11-plus successes and the long distances parents seem prepared to send their children to a grammar school ought not to be a deterrent. However, the reverse is the case, and the lack of a relationship between social status and access to grammar school is confirmed by a statistically insignificant Spearman's correlation coefficient of 0.18 ($p=0.25$) when comparing the mean Townsend deprivation index for a school's catchment population's home neighbourhoods and the proportion who gain places at grammar school. In practice (as was noted above) a substantially higher percentage of Old Northwick children are choosing grammar schools. A reasonable hypothesis is that parents in the western suburbs have much less reason to seek a grammar school place than parents in Old Northwick, because they are generally content with their local comprehensive and unwilling to take the risk of losing a place if the 11-plus is failed.

Within Old Northwick there is considerable variation in export rates to the grammar schools. Examination of the data (Figures 6.5.1 for example) suggests that it is those catchments where more deprived neighbourhoods are predominant but which also contain a

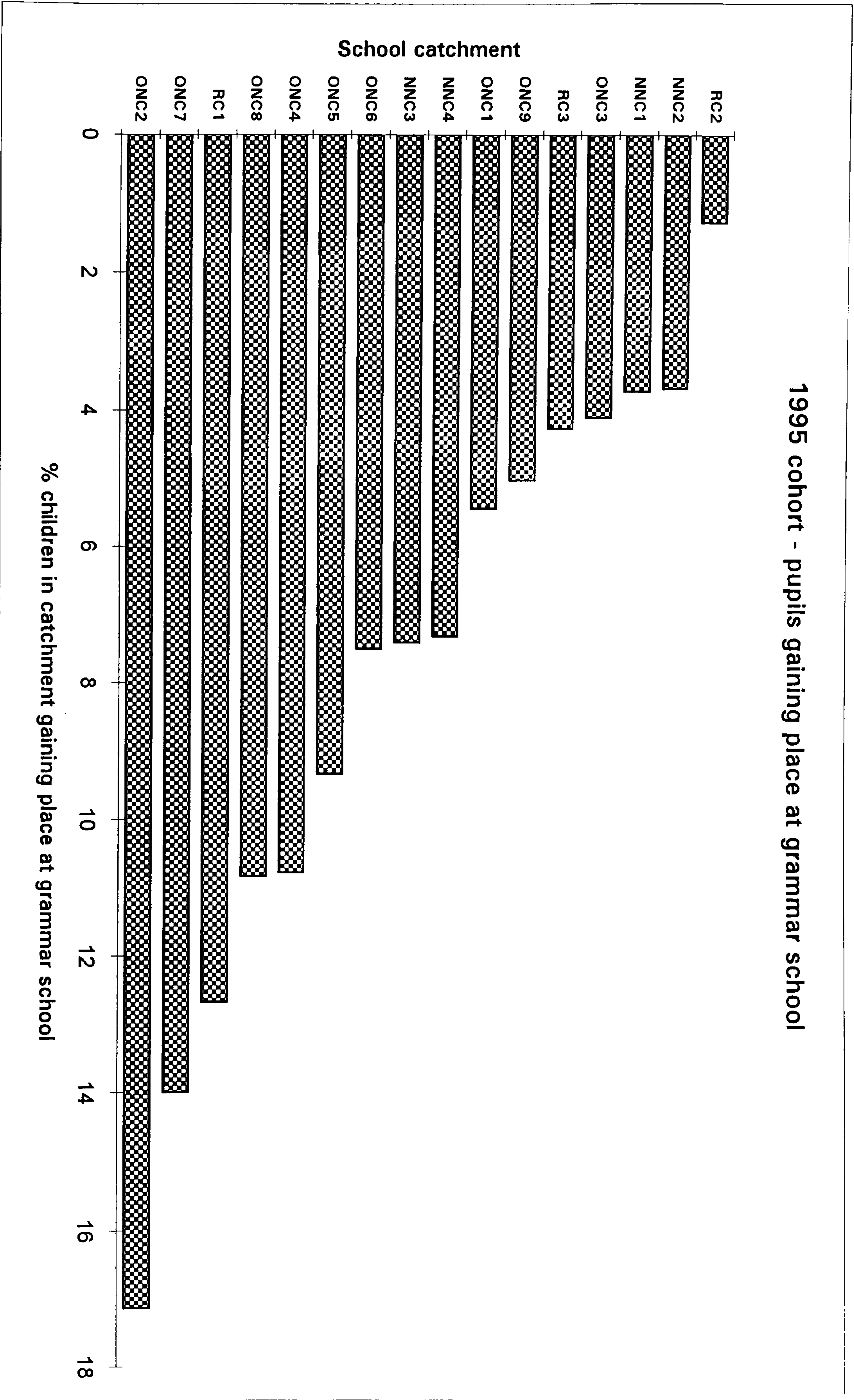


Figure 6.5.1 Pupils gaining place at grammar school by catchment

middle-class presence that are the most likely to provide grammar school pupils. There is no significant statistical relationship between the Townsend deprivation index for pupils' home postcode and the proportion of year-6 pupils in a catchment attending grammar school (Spearman's coefficient = 0.18, $p = 0.25$). But the absence of a relationship is itself highly significant in that, all things being equal, children in the least deprived neighbourhoods would be expected to perform best in the 11-plus and are therefore under-represented in grammar school intakes. The most homogeneously poor catchments, such as ONC3 and ONC1 provide few recruits - possibly because of the link between academic achievement and socio-economic position or because choice of grammar school is seen as 'unnatural' in these neighbourhoods. Catchments with substantial minorities of middle-class parents, on the other hand, are, proportionately, the greatest contributors to grammar schools.

Thus grammar schools appear to be prospering as a result of the rejection of the local comprehensive by parents who can be confident that their children will pass the 11-plus. Confidence in the ability of children to pass this examination appears to be increasingly important in the course of the study period. The percentage of children failing the 11-plus fell from an exceptionally high 54% in 1991 to 30% in 1995, perhaps reflecting an increasing fear of the consequences of failure. Parents who are not so confident, or are unhappy with the idea of selective education, and see no acceptable comprehensive alternative may opt for a denominational school. These schools are characterised by a similarly sparse and widespread catchment as grammar schools, with a median home-school journey length roughly three-quarters that of grammar schools and three times that of urban comprehensives (see Figure 6.5.2 for an example). Some catchments, which are substantial exporters to grammar schools, also contribute a significant number of pupils to

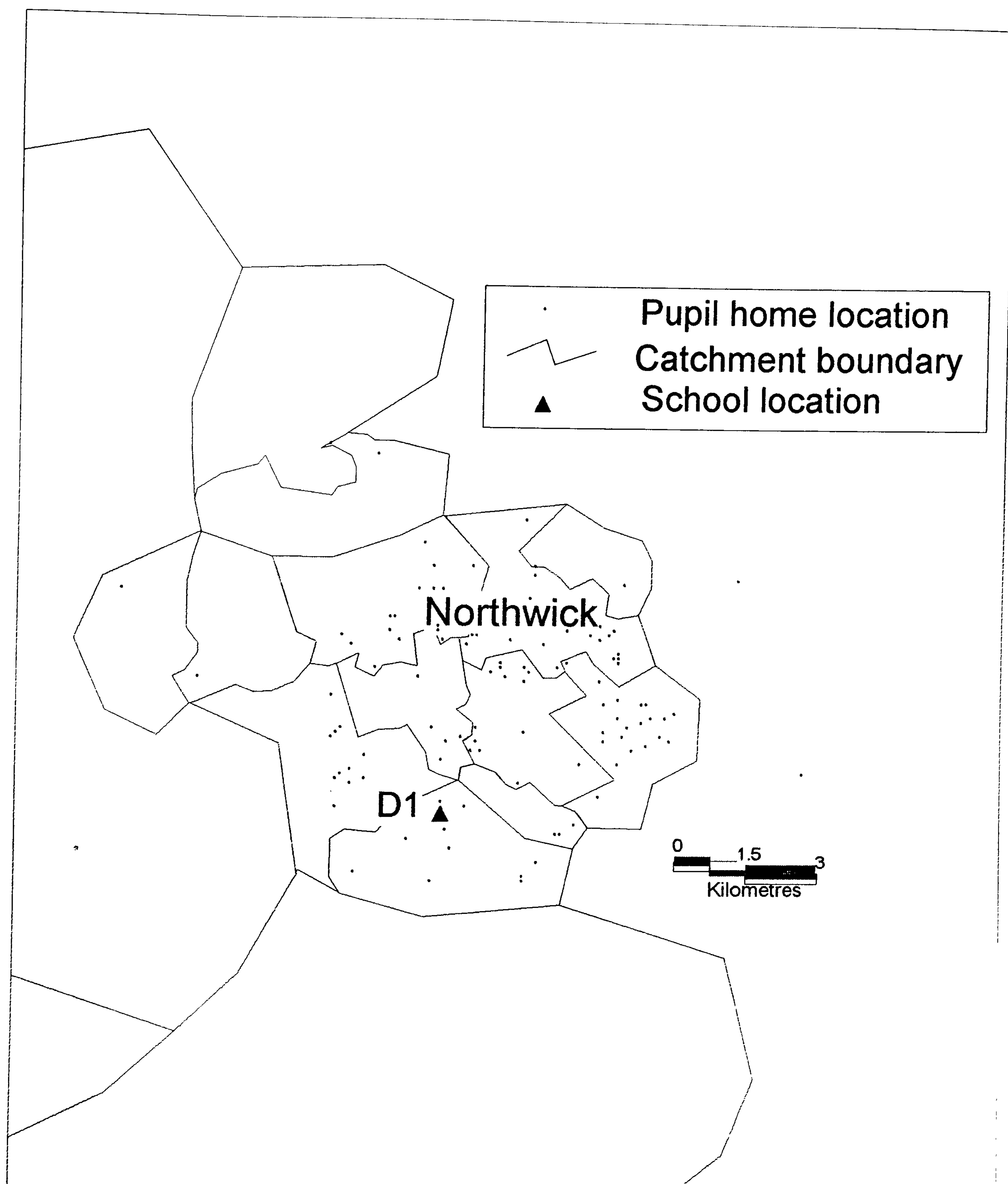


Figure 6.5.2 Home locations of D1 pupils (1995 year-6)

denominational schools, while the poorer catchments are much more likely to lose pupils to these schools.

Locality does not, then, appear to be a decisive criterion in choice of denominational school. However, the real motives of those who are choosing this option are unclear in an analysis such as this. Both denominational schools allow some latitude over the religion of the children they recruit, so that the spatial distribution of a particular denomination population may not be the only determinant of the school's *de facto* intake. One possibility is that denominational schools fulfil the function of 'poor man's grammar schools' providing a respectable alternative to a state comprehensive for those who are unlikely to pass the 11-plus. Alternatively some parents may be actively seeking the values associated with a denominational school. Such questions can only be resolved by the survey of parents. Clearly, though, the length of home-school journeys and the lack of recruitment from the more popular comprehensive schools' catchments, suggests that choice of denominational school, as for grammar school, reflects a significant rejection of the local alternative.

6.5.3 Variation in export by gender.

Another factor in choice of grammar and denominational schools is the single-sex status of all these schools. The publicity given to research showing better examination results for girls at single-sex schools (e.g. Dean, 1998) may well be an important influence in parents' choice of school. There is, indeed, some variation in patterns of choice by gender, with 40% of girls and 37% of boys in the 1995 cohort rejecting the local catchment comprehensive. Most of this disparity can indeed be explained by the greater number of girls choosing single-sex grammar and denominational schools (17% compared with 12% of boys). This disparity is not, though, necessarily explained by educational considerations, as parents may be more concerned with other considerations such as the self-confidence of

girls in single-sex environments or the more responsible behaviour of boys in co-educational schools. The reasons why parents do, or do not, choose single-sex schools are considered in the parental survey.

6.5.4 Conclusion.

It is difficult to reach any firm objective conclusion about educational quality, in the narrow terms of examination performance, as a factor in parental choice. The evidence of this research, however, is that:

- Examination league tables, the measure most commonly used to judge schools' academic quality, are more likely to be a negative factor in parental choice, steering them away from the local comprehensive but not so important when it comes to choosing an alternative.
- There appears to be a segment of the population in all types of location with a distinct preference for selective education. However, grammar schools receive a disproportionate part of their intake from the 'mixed social character' catchments of Old Northwick.
- Those parents sending their children on long journeys to grammar schools, and the higher proportion of girls attending single-sex secondary schools, may be evidence of a significant minority placing a high value on a school's academic results or single-sex education.

Of course, different parents may perceive educational quality in different ways, perhaps using broader concepts than simple examination results. Such considerations are explored in the social survey.

6.6 Social factors.

The analysis now proceeds to a consideration of the role of home and school neighbourhood social characteristics in parental choice. Much of the critical literature cited in Chapter Three was concerned with the probability that parental choice would operate to the detriment of the socio-economically deprived. Two themes were common in this critique. First, the middle-classes would have the appropriate cultural capital to successfully negotiate the liberalised secondary transfer process and therefore have a competitive advantage over parents in more deprived areas. Second, one of the prime aims of the legislation, the rewarding of ‘successful’ schools through pupil-led funding and the ability to attract the best pupils, would lead to potentially irreversible decline for ‘unsuccessful’ schools in less favoured areas. As schools would be judged, at least partly, by examination results in league tables, the link between school attainment and the social characteristics of its intake would guarantee even poor schools in middle-class neighbourhoods an advantage over those in less-favoured areas. These may be faced with little prospect other than a decline into ‘sink-school’ status.

This section explores the extent to which these fears are being proved - whether neighbourhood characteristics appear to be an important factor in movement out of, and between, catchments. As no occupational or income information is available for individual children, the proxy of social classification of home neighbourhood, based on unit postcode, must be used. The classification system was described in the previous chapter. In summary, ‘struggling’ and ‘aspiring’ neighbourhoods correspond to deprived and mixed residential areas with rented and low quality accommodation predominating. ‘Established’, ‘climbing’ and ‘prospering’ neighbourhoods are characterised by a predominance of the mortgaged or home-owning middle-classes. Figure 4.1 provided a picture of the social geography of Northwick, with the relatively affluent suburbs of New Northwick contrasting with Old

Northwick's predominantly lower status neighbourhoods. The social polarity between the two parts of the city is again emphasised when comparing the proportion of parents living in each neighbourhood category (Figure 6.6.1).

Four main questions are posed in this section:

- Are middle-class parents making better, or different, use of parental choice than those in less affluent areas?
- Has there been any change in the importance of neighbourhood social characteristics in school choice in the study period?
- Does the social character of a child's home neighbourhood affect the likelihood that they will choose an out-of-catchment school?
- How has parental choice affected the social character of secondary school intakes?

6.6.1 Socio-economic variation in the use of choice.

The hypothesis that the middle-class will make more use of parental choice is not supported by a first, superficial analysis of the data. Out-of-catchment schools are chosen by 42% of children living in 'struggling' and 'aspiring' neighbourhoods compared with 35% for parents in more prosperous areas (see Figure 6.6.2). However, children living in middle-class areas who do choose out-of-catchment schools are travelling longer distances (Table 6.6.1). Such figures are not surprising. Middle-class parents living in middle-class areas are likely to be satisfied with their local catchment comprehensive. Two types of middle-class parent appear, though, to be prepared to have their children travel long distances to secure a place at a suitable school. The first group contains those living in urban areas of mixed social character with catchment schools whose intake contains only a minority of middle-class children. These parents often choose suburban comprehensive or

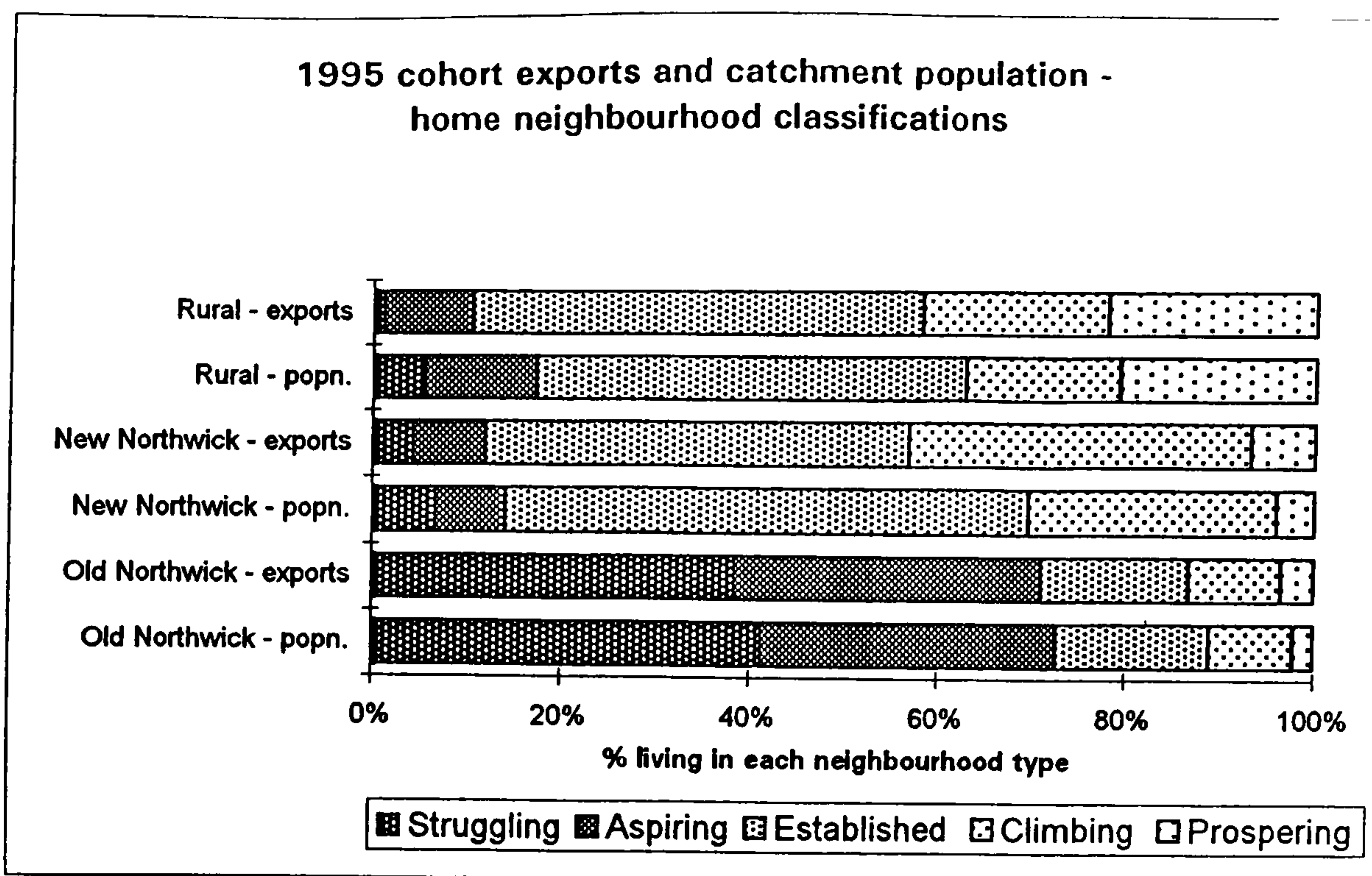


Figure 6.6.1 Geographical variation in social characteristics of year 6 population

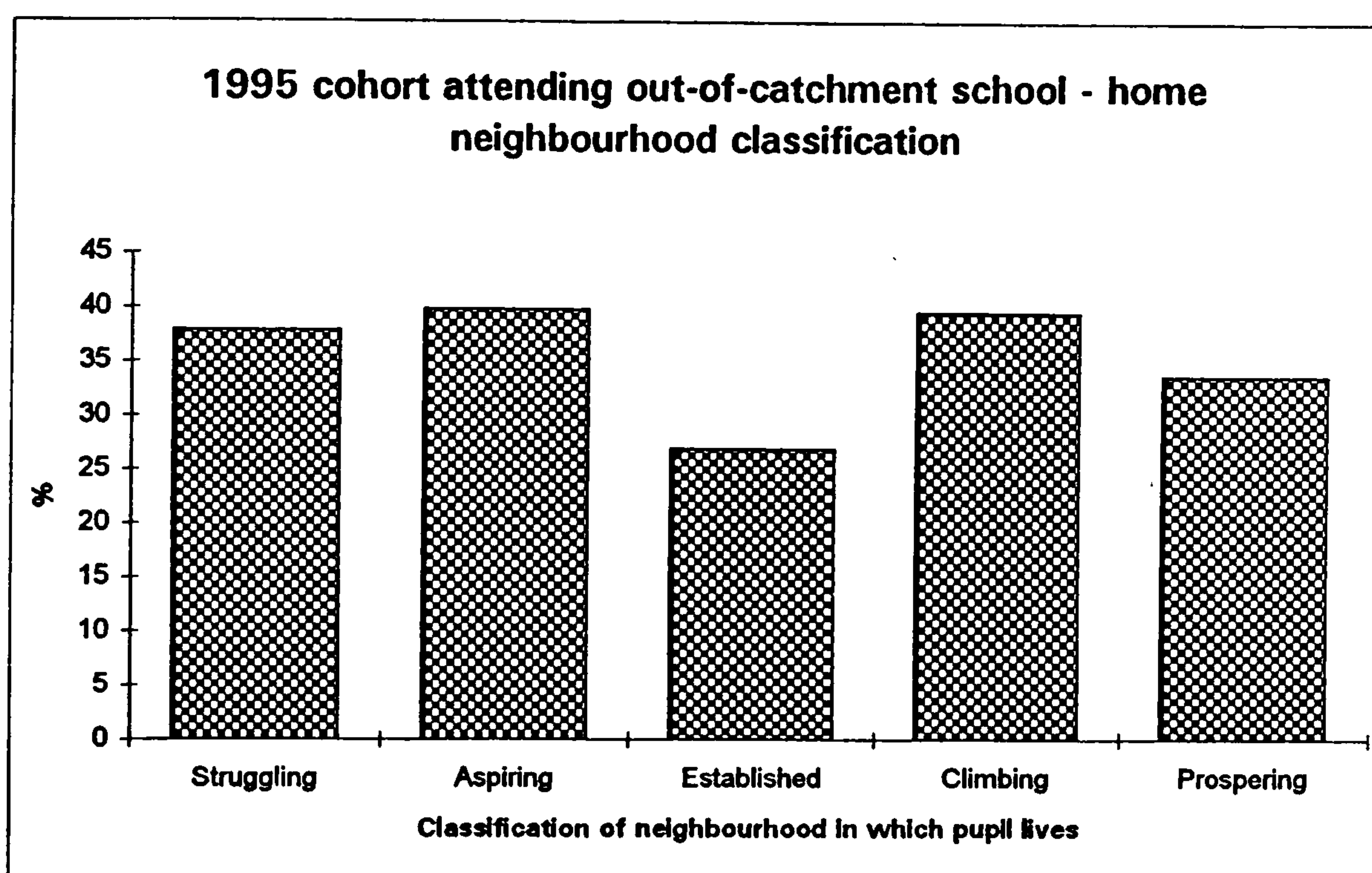


Figure 6.6.2 Socio-economic characterisation of 1995 exports' home neighbourhood

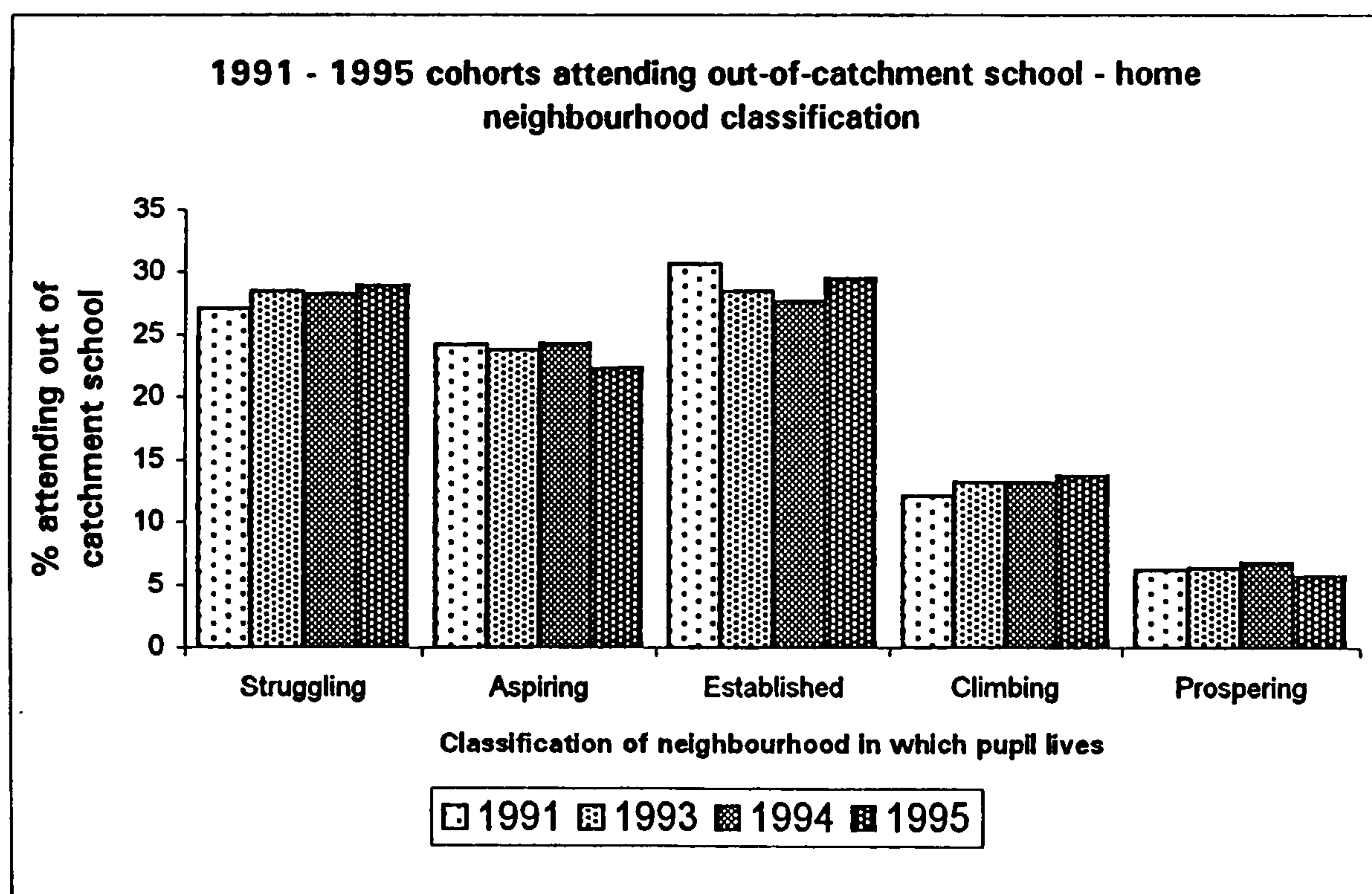


Figure 6.6.3 Trend in % exports by socio-economic classification of home neighbourhood

grammar schools for their children. The other group is parents who will be prepared to send their children long distances for a grammar school education. About 19% of children in ‘prospering’ neighbourhoods gain a grammar school place and many of these live in rural areas. The long distances such children can travel to grammar school are shown in the map of G1’s *de facto* catchment (Figure 6.2.1).

Neighbourhood classification	Mean home-school distance (km.)
Struggling	
Pensioners and single parents	2.84
Council Tenants	2.99
Less Prosperous Pensioner Areas	3.02
Aspiring	
Academic Centres & student areas	3.34
Young Married Suburbia	3.59
Established	
Mature Well-off Self-employed couples	7.06
Comfortable Middle Agers	2.87
Climbing	
Well-off Suburban Areas	4.11
Prospering	
Affluent Achievers	6.23

Table 6.6.1 - Mean home-school journey distance for 1995 cohort by neighbourhood classification (further sub-divided)

The greater use made of parental choice by parents in the less-affluent neighbourhoods may reflect a greater dissatisfaction with the local school than a positive choice of an alternative. Whether this is so, or not, there is little evidence here of parents in higher-status areas utilising choice more than parents elsewhere.

6.6.2 Change in the importance of neighbourhood social characteristics in school choice.

Children from the more deprived neighbourhoods may constitute a substantial proportion of all exports. Are, though, their choices reflecting the hypothesis that schools in more affluent locations are ‘cream-skimming’ pupils from more deprived areas (Adler and Raab,

1988, Ball, 1993, Le Grand, 1991). Table 6.6.2, which compares the social characterisation of the intakes of out-of-catchment schools with that of exports' home catchment, provides support for this case. In this table, each catchment is assigned the decile of the Townsend Index population for the whole 1995 cohort corresponding to the mean Townsend Index of the catchment population. The table shows that only 17% of pupils choose an out-of-catchment school that attracts a more deprived intake than their that of the home catchment population. Less than 5% of children living in catchments whose mean intake fall within the most deprived three deciles travel to a comprehensive with a more deprived intake. It can also be seen that those catchments that export most children to grammar schools are in the middle range of the social scale.

% of catchment exports								
Townsend Index decile of destination compared with home catchment	Home catchment decile							
	3	4	6	7	8	9	10	Total
More deprived	33	11	32	21	1	4	0	17
Same	41	3	0	14	0	4	0	11
Less deprived	0	32	17	19	72	62	88	35
Going to grammar	20	41	29	24	14	11	6	22
Going to denominational	6	13	22	22	13	19	7	16

Table 6.6.2 - Destinations of 1995 cohort exports categorised by Townsend Index decile corresponding to mean Townsend Index of catchment population - Highest decile is most deprived

This table is, though, a snapshot of the relative use made of choice by parents from different types of neighbourhood. It is feasible that the higher export rates for children in the 'struggling' and 'aspiring' neighbourhoods reflect pre-existing patterns of pupil movement and that the increase in expression of parental choice favours parents in higher-status socio-economic groups. When temporal variation in export rates from different neighbourhood types is considered (Figure 6.6.3), the figures for the highest and lowest status neighbourhoods are seen to have increased the least (4.0% for 'struggling' 4.8% for 'prospering' areas). The latter statistic may reflect the fact that the most affluent were

already skilled in securing a satisfactory school for their children - either by location, knowledge and expertise, or money, in the case of private education. The low figure for children in 'struggling' neighbourhoods (contrasting with 7.2% for children from 'aspiring' neighbourhoods) is more worrying, providing some support for theories of sink-school creation.

The two categories of neighbourhood with the highest changes in movement out-of-catchment are 'aspiring' and 'climbing', both rates rising by 7.2%. Both neighbourhood types are particularly characterised by residents who are likely to move on to higher status areas at some time in the future. This result is, then, unsurprising as such parents are the most likely to send their children to a school in a higher-status area. In particular, sections of the 'aspiring working class', by securing a place at a suburban comprehensive, are able to reap the benefit of access to a 'middle-class' educational system. Parents only have to pay the extra travel costs. This extension of choice is, in the case-study area, has only been made possible by falling rolls in the local secondary system. With rolls now rising (see Table 4.1), parents who have grown accustomed to access to places at attractively located comprehensives may be denied them, unless new schools are built or popular schools expand. These issues are more fully developed in Chapter Nine, whilst the extent to which parents believe social issues are an ingredient of school choice is evaluated by the parental survey. Now the assumption, implicit in the preceding paragraphs, that parents will tend to choose schools in catchments of a similar or better socio-economic status to their own, is put to the test.

6.6.3 The relationship between a child's home neighbourhood and catchment, and the destination school.

Much of the critical literature on parental choice assumes that parents choosing out-of-catchment schools will tend to favour more affluent areas and that schools in deprived

neighbourhoods will suffer as a result. Children are much less likely to transfer to a school with a lower status catchment than that of their local neighbourhood (Table 6.6.3). This is not, as might be expected, a zero-sum game, as the children in the more deprived catchments can take places at grammar and denominational schools, whose status is not linked to their location, while the ‘spare places’ in New Northwick schools allow space for ‘upward social mobility’.

Home catchment T.I. decile compared with home location T.I. decile			
Destination catchment	% More deprived	% Same	% Less deprived
non-mover	54	64	70
less deprived catchment	14	17	10
same level catchment	6	4	4
more deprived catchment	6	5	7
grammar	12	5	5
denominational	9	5	4

Table 6.6.3 - 1995 cohort destinations - Townsend Index (T.I.) decile of home location and home catchment

Children in the higher-status catchments are very unlikely to choose a school that is not a grammar or in a similar catchment. There are only two catchments with a reasonable social balance - ONC2 and ONC4. The outcomes here are notably different. ONC4 manages to retain its catchment population and, thus, is the only comprehensive school representative of the general urban population. ONC2, on the other hand, tends to lose the pupils in the middle-class parts of its catchment to the neighbouring rural comprehensive and grammar schools. The factors underlying these very different outcomes cannot be identified by the GIS analysis but can be explored in the survey of parents.

Pupil flows from the other Old Northwick catchments tend to be of two types - longer distance moves to schools in New Northwick or shorter ‘socially neutral’ moves to schools in neighbouring catchments. The former moves are made up of a combination of children from higher status and ‘aspiring’ neighbourhoods, presumably seeking a ‘safer’ or ‘better’ education than they believe is available locally. The loss of such pupils may indeed

adversely affect the schools serving the more deprived segment of the population that is most in need of a quality education. The degree to which parental choice affects a school's intake is now examined.

6.6.4 The effects of parental choice on school intakes.

Parental choice has the potential to change the characteristics of the composition of secondary school intakes. This applies as much to the social status as to the educational abilities of children. Critics of choice claim that superficially attractive schools in middle-class areas will cream-off the brighter children from more deprived catchments. This analysis is limited in the extent to which it can address the educational consequences of the parental choice process on school intakes. All that can be deduced here is the social mix of a school based on the characterisation of the neighbourhood from which a child comes. Even the assumption that children from more affluent neighbourhoods are more likely to achieve better academic results is problematic bearing in mind the ecological fallacy - the brightest children from the most deprived area are, perhaps, the most likely to move. However, irrespective of educational factors, social mix is seen as an important issue in many debates about comprehensive and grammar schools.

Parental choice succeeds in increasing the social mix of middle-class catchments in the case-study area (see Table 6.6.4) for two reasons. First, grammar schools, without catchments themselves, dis-proportionately recruit pupils in higher-status neighbourhoods from any particular catchment (Table 6.6.5). Second, because of excess capacity in the schools, they import significant numbers of pupils from more deprived neighbourhoods in Old Northwick. It should be noted, though, that as a comprehensive school in this sort of location becomes more popular, its intake is likely to become much more socially homogenous. This is because less people from the home catchment wish to leave it so that there are less spare places for those outside. Also, as only a few places are left, they will be

filled by applicants living closest to the school, and sharing a similar background to the catchment pupils. Such a process can be observed with NNC3 whose *de facto* catchment shrinks as the school gains in popularity in contrast to NNC4 (see Figures 6.6.4, 6.6.5, 6.6.6 and 6.6.7). A similar effect is likely to be observed if rising rolls limit the spare places available to out-of-catchment children with no increase in school capacity.

School	Catchment	Intake	Difference between catchment and intake
NNC4	-2.0	0.8	-2.8
ONC8	2.6	5.2	-2.6
ONC2	0.3	2.8	-2.5
NNC2	-2.8	-1.5	-1.3
ONC7	2.0	3.1	-1.1
NNC3	-1.3	-0.6	-0.8
ONC4	-1.1	-0.3	-0.8
ONC5	2.2	2.5	-0.3
ONC6	3.3	3.5	-0.2
NNC1	-1.3	-1.2	-0.1
ONC3	8.6	8.8	-0.1
RC1	-0.9	-0.9	0.0
RC3	-2.1	-2.1	0.0
RC2	-0.8	-0.9	0.1
ONC9	6.5	6.1	0.5
ONC1	5.4	3.7	1.6

Table 6.6.4 - Comparison of Townsend Index of 1995 cohort catchment and intake populations

Catchment	To grammar	Catchment	To denominational
NNC1	2.8	3.8	4.0
NNC2	2.3	2.5	2.5
NNC3	2.8	3.8	3.0
NNC4	2.6	3.3	3.5
ONC1	4.2	8.4	8.3
ONC2	3.4	5.1	3.5
ONC3	9.4	9.4	8.2
ONC4	3.2	4.0	3.8
ONC5	4.8	6.2	5.3
ONC6	7.2	7.2	6.1
ONC7	4.9	6.2	5.6
ONC8	5.7	6.6	6.1
ONC9	7.3	8.5	7.6
RC1	3.4	4.3	3.7
RC2	2.5	4.5	0.0
RC3	3.1	3.2	3.7

Table 6.6.5 - Mean Townsend deprivation indices for catchment populations and exports to grammar and denominational schools

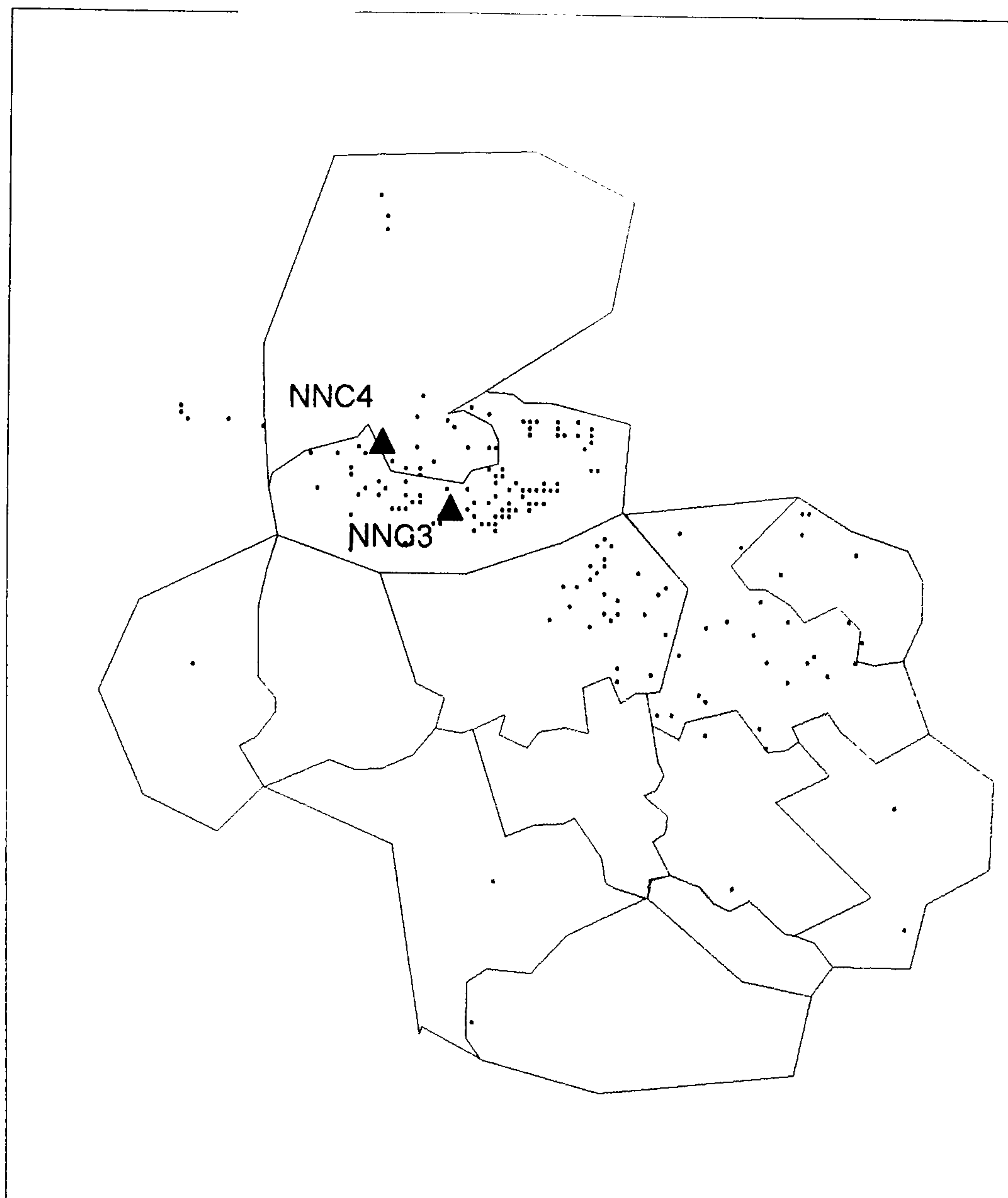


Figure 6.6.4 Home locations of year-6 pupils allocated to NNC3 - 1991

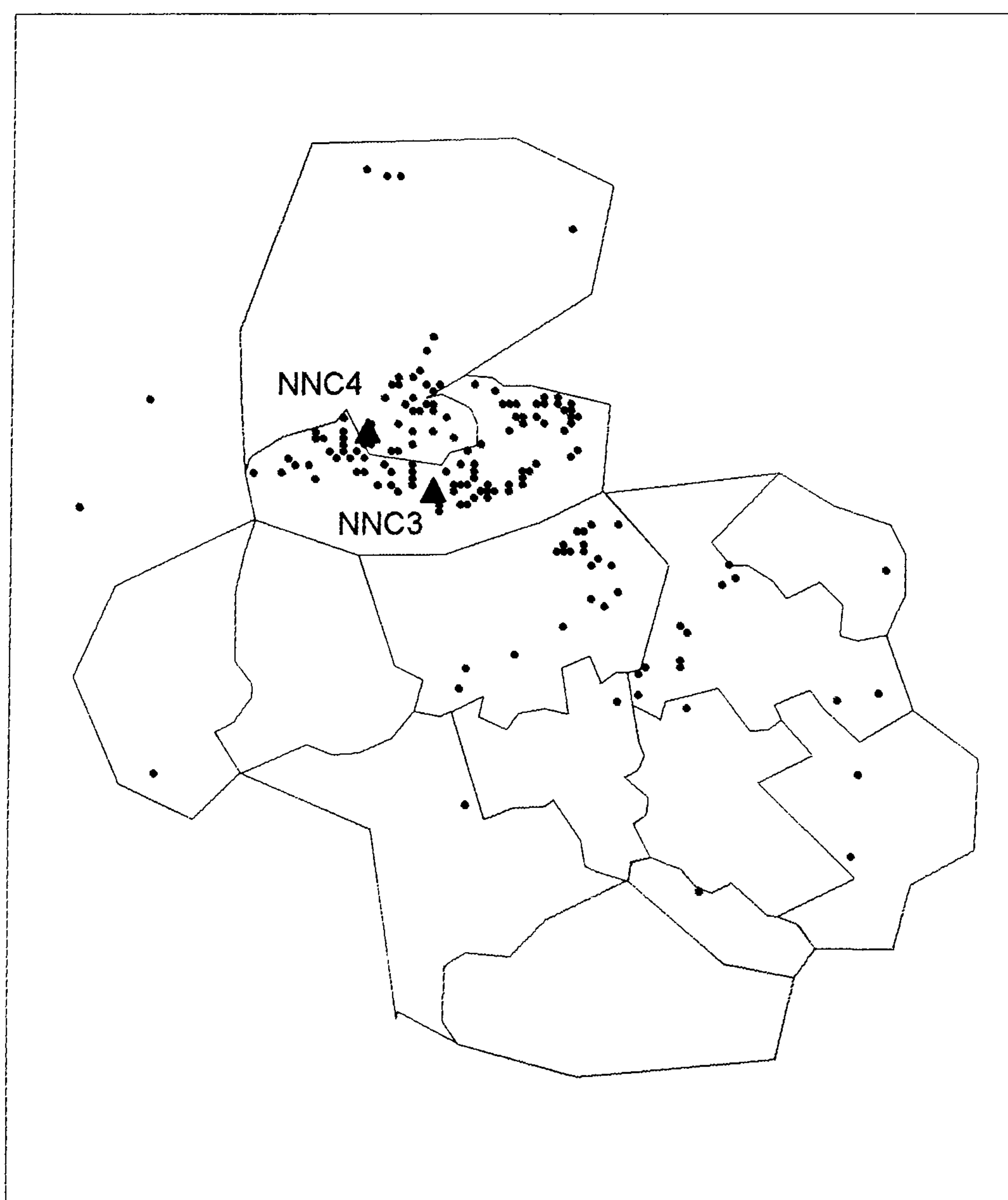
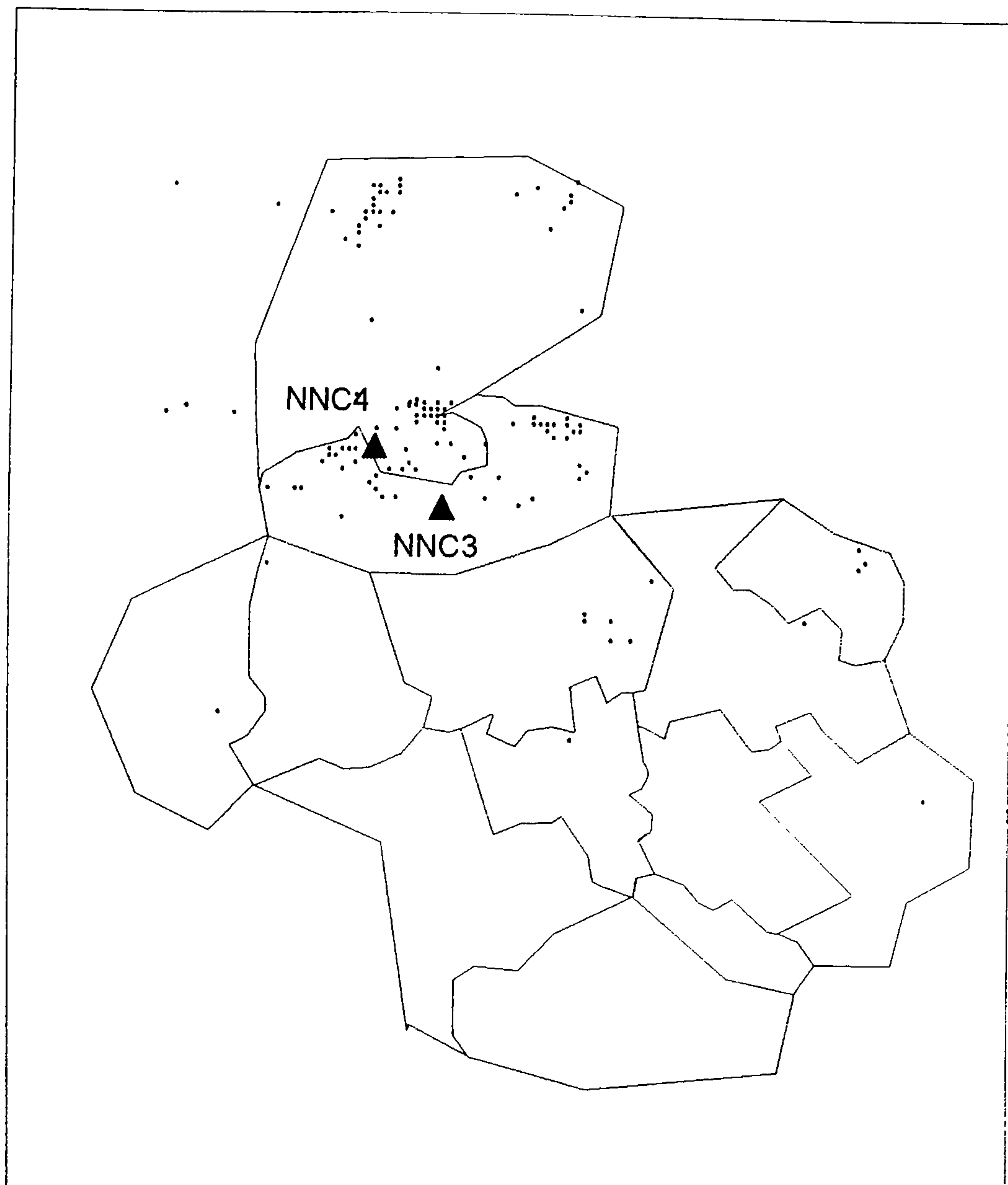
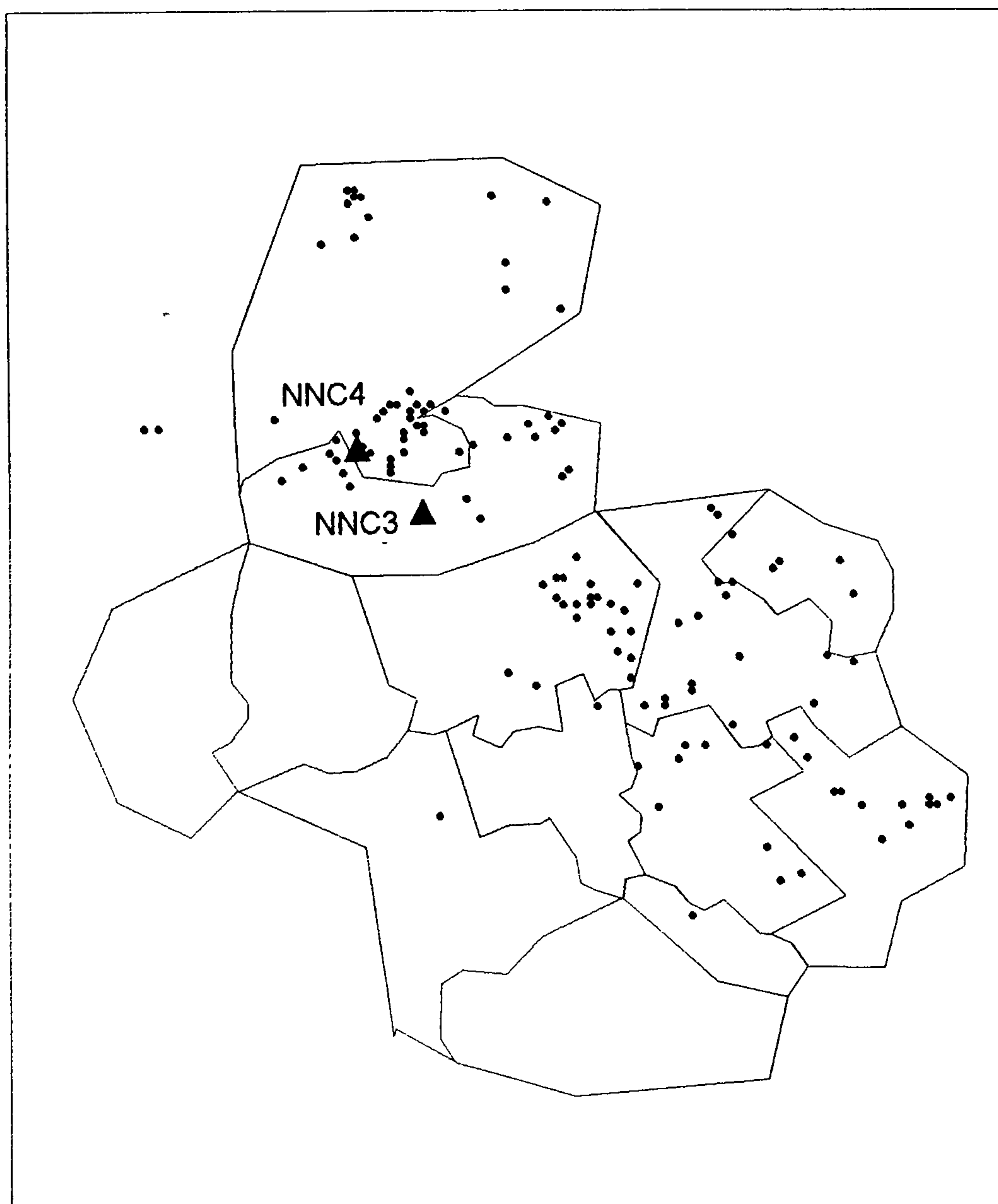


Figure 6.6.5 Home locations of year-6 pupils allocated to NNC3 - 1995



**Figure 6.6.6 Home locations of year-6 pupils
allocated to NNC4 - 1991**



**Figure 6.6.7 Home locations of year-6 pupils
allocated to NNC4 - 1995**

It should be noted that while many schools in New and Old Northwick show a significant increase in the proportion of children from ‘aspiring’ and ‘struggling’ neighbourhoods in their intake compared with their catchment populations, the effects are very different. New Northwick schools become more socially balanced, but still retain a preponderance of middle-class children. The Old Northwick intakes are even more socially unbalanced than the catchment population. Such processes, if they continue unchecked are potential sources of sink-schools, or, at the very least, a two or three tier system.

In Chapter Three it was noted that a recent study in South Wales (Gorard and Fitz, 1998) found that social polarisation in secondary schools had actually decreased, contrary to the expectations or findings of many other researchers (e.g. Adler and Raab, 1988; Ball, 1993; Mar Molinero, 1988; Le Grand, 1991; Bradford, 1991; Gewirtz *et al*, 1995; Smith and Noble, 1995). In this study social polarisation, as measured by the mean Townsend index of the home locations of intake pupils, did indeed fall for 13 out of the 21 schools (see Table 6.6.6), and to that extent this study supports Gorard and Fitz’s findings. However, the most popular and least popular schools such as NNC3 and ONC9 have seen a *rise* in social polarisation in the study period and this may be a result of the factors, such as superior middle-class cultural capital and material resources, identified by Gewirtz *et al* (1995) and others as likely to increase social polarisation. It is the increased take-up of spare places in schools of intermediate popularity such as NNC4 by pupils from relatively deprived backgrounds that has led to the decrease in social polarisation identified in this study. Such a process is highly dependent on the extent of spare capacity within the local system.

School	Mean T.I. of 1991 intake	Mean T.I. of 1995 intake	More polarised?*
ONC3	9.1	8.8	N
ONC1	4.2	3.7	N
ONC9	5.1	6.1	Y
ONC2	1.9	2.8	Y
ONC8	5.3	5.2	N
ONC7	3.7	3.1	N
ONC5	1.1	2.5	Y
ONC6	3.3	3.5	Y
D1	1.6	1.0	N
ONC4	-0.6	-0.3	N
RC1	-1.0	-0.9	N
D2	0.7	1.2	N
NNC1	-1.4	-1.2	N
NNC3	0.3	-0.6	Y
RC2	-0.8	-0.9	Y
RC3	-1.6	-2.1	Y
NNC4	-1.6	0.8	N
NNC2	-2.3	-1.5	N
G3	0.9	1.0	N
G2	-0.6	-1.4	Y
G1	-1.1	-0.2	N

Table 6.6.6 Social polarisation in schools: trend in mean Townsend Index of home neighbourhood of year-6 school intake.

* School's intake is more polarised if 1995 mean intake Townsend Index is further from the population mean (approximately 1.1) than 1991 intake mean.

Finally, some grammar school intakes can display a greater social mix, in terms of pupils' home neighbourhood, than some suburban comprehensives. For example, between 1991 and 1995 G1 and G3 (though not G2) recruited a greater proportion of their intake from 'struggling' and 'deprived' neighbourhoods than any of the New Northwick comprehensive schools. Though the ecological fallacy needs to be borne in mind, this could be interpreted as evidence towards a view that strong parental choice in a comprehensive only system, with over-subscription governed by catchment or home-school distance criteria, may

penalise children in the most deprived areas. This issue is discussed further in Chapter Nine.

6.6.5 Conclusion

It has been shown that parents at every level of social status are exercising parental choice and there is evidence that members of the aspiring working class are making as much, if not more, use of it than anyone else. However, the tendency of middle-class parents to live in areas well served educationally is likely to substantially reduce their need to opt for anything other than their local comprehensive.

- The lowest increase in use of choice is by parents in the least and most deprived areas. This evidence provides some support for the view that geographical convenience is more important for parents in the poorer areas and that they lack the cultural or material capital to effectively utilise school-choice procedures. Parents in the most prosperous areas may already be effective in securing the educational opportunities they desire for their children.
- Those who choose out-of-catchment schools nearly always pick schools in catchments of a similar or higher social status than their own.
- Much of the fluidity in the system is dependent on spare places in the New Northwick schools. Were these spare places to be absent, then the ability of parents in less-favoured areas to secure places in such schools would be severely limited.
- Grammar schools are dis-proportionately recruiting from the higher status neighbourhoods of each catchment whilst the social status of pupils choosing denominational schools appears much more representative of their home catchment.

6.7 Procedural factors.

The Eastland secondary transfer procedure, in common with all other LEAs, does not provide parents with an absolute right to choose. The selection criteria that are introduced when a school is over-subscribed limit parents' choices, though they do not necessarily know to what extent when they express their first preference. Consequently, some fail to achieve their first choice and must fall back on a second, or even third preference. This section asks the question:

- To what extent does the geography of parental choice reflect pressures resulting from 'fear of failure'?

6.7.1 Influence on transfer procedures on parental preference expression.

It is important to restate the fact that no parent in the study period was refused a place at the local catchment comprehensive, if they chose it in the *first round* of preferences. However, the more popular schools are over-subscribed after this first round. The question posed is: do parents only risk failure if there is a safe alternative?

On the whole, this would appear to be true. Over 75% of failed first preferences are for the two most popular comprehensives, NNC3 and ONC4 and the three grammar schools. Parents who fail to secure their first round preferences tend to live in catchments which can virtually be guaranteed to have spare places after the first round of allocations (Table 6.7.1). However, only 36% of parents who failed to secure a first choice and live in a catchment with spare places, actually chose the local school in the end in 1995. The extra capacity of NNC4 provided an outlet for many who were unsuccessful in the first round (Table 6.7.2). The availability of this suburban fallback was by no means guaranteed, though, and a certain amount of guessing is necessary for parents.

Home catchment	Number unsuccessful				% unsuccessful
	1991	1993	1994	1995	1991-1995
ONC6	37	25	43	59	16
ONC8	48	30	22	32	13
ONC9	31	31	34	35	13
ONC3	34	30	49	16	12
ONC2	36	26	36	23	12
ONC7	44	16	17	20	9
ONC5	10	18	9	14	5
ONC1	12	16	12	7	5
ONC4	8	8	12	6	3
RC1	13	8	6	4	3
NNC1	13	4	8	4	3
NNC4	2	4	14	8	3
NNC3	11	6	4	5	2
RC3	6	4	1	3	1
NNC2	1	2	3	2	1
RC2	1	0	1	0	0.2
Total	307	228	271	238	

Table 6.7.1 - Children who failed to secure their first choice secondary school

School	Number of children securing places at school				Mean 1991-1995
	1991	1993	1994	1995	
NNC4	12	20	22	59	28
ONC9	23	14	16	9	16
ONC6	16	11	16	19	16
NNC3	23	3	19	1	12
ONC1	8	11	16	10	11
ONC5	10	8	17	9	11
NNC1	10	7	19	4	10
ONC3	3	17	9	5	9
ONC8	14	2	1	5	6
NNC2	0	8	1	12	5
ONC2	5	7	4	3	5
RC1	5	5	3	3	4
ONC7	5	4	2	3	4
RC3	3	1	0	2	2
D2	3	0	0	0	1
D1	1	1	0	1	1
ONC4	1	0	0	1	1

Table 6.7.2 - Destinations of children who fail to secure their first choice of secondary school

6.7.2 Conclusion

Generally, the fact that relatively few parents living in over-subscribed catchments fail to gain their first preference suggests that procedural factors do appear to play a role in

patterns of pupil movement. If all parents were guaranteed a place at their local comprehensive school if they failed to get their first choice, very different patterns might emerge. Of course, parents may well be choosing a popular local school because of its quality rather than from fear of the loss of the local option in the second round of preferences. This is an aspect of choice that will be further investigated in the parental survey.

6.8 Summary.

This analysis has shown that parental choice of secondary school is an option that is increasingly used by a growing proportion of parents of all types in the Eastland case-study area. A variety of patterns of pupil movement have been identified. Rural catchment exports are mainly to grammar schools (together with the approximate tenth of children attending private schools). New Northwick exports are predominantly short moves to the neighbouring comprehensive. Old Northwick is characterised by more complex interactions but is dominated by less privileged catchments losing pupils to neighbouring comprehensives, grammar and denominational schools and the schools of New Northwick. There is some evidence of sink-school creation.

A number of factors in the propensity of a catchment to export pupils were identified. The location of a large number of parents near catchment borders made a neighbouring comprehensive a convenient option for many. The demographic imbalance between catchment population and PALs (in both directions) meant that there was a systematic instability that was reflected in high rates of movement in and out of such catchments. The evidence suggests, though, that these imbalances tended to reflect, rather than cause, existing patterns of pupil movement. Many parents are, presumably, choosing grammar schools for educational reasons, but the relative lack of demand from New Northwick parents suggests that such a choice may commonly be an indication of a strong rejection of

an unsatisfactory local school. Social factors do appear to be an ingredient in choice. The extent that parents from more deprived areas, in particular, are taking advantage of choice is noteworthy. They may be using public transport to 'escape' the more threatening inner-city schools for attractive suburban comprehensives. Finally, the lack of risk-taking by those in catchments without surplus places indicates that procedural factors may inhibit some parents from risking the pursuit of an alternative, whilst those with nothing to lose are much more able to express their real preference in the first round.

It is clear from the above that the same parent may make very different choices in different geographical contexts. In a rural catchment sending a child to a local comprehensive may be entirely non-problematic. The same parents, if living in the city, might reject the local comprehensive on any one or combination of the preceding grounds. The social survey attempts to more clearly evaluate the varying motivation of parents.

Indeed, though this analysis has provided an excellent picture of the dynamics of pupil movement over the case-study period a number of questions remain unanswered. Many are addressed in the social survey. They include: the factors that are most important for parents when making choice, how parents go about making a choice, the extent to which their choice is influenced by procedural factors or the constraints by transport, the relationship of choice to parents' occupations and the degree to which they secure the type of school they ideally want. All these issues are covered in the following chapters.

Chapter 7. Social Survey methodology.

7.1. Introduction.

This chapter describes the design and conduct of a survey of parents that was intended to identify and evaluate the personal motivation and influences underlying the pupil movements revealed by the GIS analysis. One hundred and sixty two structured interviews were completed with parents of children transferring to secondary school in September 1995. The interviews were conducted throughout Eastland with parents answering a standard set of questions about the factors influencing their choice of preference of secondary school.

The chapter starts with an outline of the aims of the survey and a description of how they were translated into its various components. A discussion of the rationale behind the sampling strategy is followed by an evaluation of the degree to which the final sample is representative of the total population of parents of year-6 children. After a critical summary of the conduct of the interviews, the chapter finishes with an account of the strategy behind the analysis of the survey results.

7.2. Social survey aims and their operationalisation.

This section describes the aims of the survey and the method chosen to achieve them. It then considers the translation of those aims into, first, a questionnaire structure and, second, the specific questions in that questionnaire.

7.2.1 Survey Aims.

The principal aim of the survey was to increase understanding of the way that parents choose (or express their preference for) their child's secondary school. There are two main reasons for this. First, to add value to the GIS analysis described in Chapter Six, by relating

the statistical data on inter-catchment movements to the parents' decision-making processes. Second, to gain information, not available elsewhere, on how parents in different geographical and social contexts go about choosing a school for their child.

The linkage with the GIS analysis is not only important for the added explanation of the patterns of movement revealed there. The survey also guards against claims of social variation in these patterns being confounded by the ecological fallacy. For example, the actual occupational class of parents in particular locations who were choosing out-of-catchment schools can be compared with the postcode census-based, socio-economic characterisation of such parents in the GIS analysis. If the GIS analysis identifies lower-status neighbourhoods in a catchment as more likely to produce out-of-catchment movement when the social survey reveals that it is those in higher status jobs in these neighbourhoods who are the parents making this choice, then this is an instance of the ecological fallacy. Conversely, if the relevant characteristics identified in the social survey and GIS analysis correspond, then much more confidence can be placed in the ability of the GIS analysis to map real social flows.

There was a large amount of additional information that parents could provide about the transfer process that was otherwise unavailable. This included the importance of different information sources in the choice of school, the factors that were influential in their choice, the perceived range of choice available to parents and the influence of factors such as children's friends and siblings and transport availability. Collection of categorical information from parents such as occupational class and their own educational background would allow consideration of the influence of such factors in the choice process.

7.2.2 Survey method.

Two alternative methods for the social survey were seriously considered: postal questionnaires and interviews with questionnaires. The use of focus groups or in-depth unstructured or semi-structured interviews with parents was rejected because the greater flexibility and sensitivity to the views of the respondent they provide (Bailey, 1987) would not compensate for the necessarily smaller samples associated with these more qualitative approaches. The combination of a spatial and socio-economic focus in this study requires a sample that would ideally include parents from all catchments and reflect the diversity of socio-economic circumstances and educational choices within each catchment.

The use of a postal questionnaire could meet this objective by allowing a much larger sample-size than is possible with personal interviews, besides providing other benefits such as lower costs. There are, however, problems with this approach. First, mail surveys generally have lower response rates than personal interviews (Moser and Kalton, 1971). One hypothesis for the disparity in response rates is that people are more confident in their speaking than their writing ability (Bailey, 1987). If this is true then the expected middle-class bias in response-rate in this survey is likely to be greater for a postal questionnaire than for an interview schedule because of the lack of facility in writing amongst deprived groups, in particular. Postal questionnaires do allow the respondent to answer in their own time but there is no control over the circumstances in which they are completed. This may affect who in the household contributes and whether all questions are answered. For example, a carefully structured questionnaire that covers all stages of the transfer process may effectively be ruined by non-response to a question perceived as complex or 'boring'.

Whereas postal questionnaires must use carefully structured questions in simple English that allow no ambiguity, an interviewer can pose more complex questions and check that the interviewee always clearly understands their meaning. Personal interviews also provide an opportunity to pursue topics and issues not foreseen when the questionnaire was designed. In a study where there is so much variation in geographical, social, and educational context, the flexibility provided by the interview format was the key factor in choosing this method over the postal questionnaire.

It was decided to interview parents in their homes with the researcher reading from a fully structured questionnaire. Interviewees would be randomly selected using the GIS database and the sample stratified by catchment. Letters inviting parents to participate in the survey would then be sent out via the LEA (a fuller account of the sample selection and procedural aspects of the survey is contained in sections 7.3 and 7.4). Use of a standard questionnaire format allows evaluation of the variability amongst parents of such matters as the values underlying their decision, the extent of choice available and the contextual factors that might affect their choice. However, an interview, unlike a postal survey, permits diversions from the standard questions where appropriate and, crucially with such a sensitive topic, strength of feeling can be gauged. Interviews were taped so that any doubts about the responses recorded on the questionnaire form could be resolved by referral to the recording. Parents were always asked if they objected to the use of a tape recorder and the use of taping had no discernible influence on interviewees' responses.

7.2.3 Questionnaire design.

Having chosen the appropriate method, the next stage was the translation of the survey objectives into the questionnaire itself. This was primarily designed as a means of establishing the extent of socio-spatial variation in parental choice of secondary school.

There was a particular concern to identify variation in the perceived extent of choice available to parents in their decision-making strategies, in the information they used, the underlying reasons for and the level of satisfaction with their choices. Finally, of course, it was necessary to gather contextual information about parents and their children that would allow structured analysis of the results of the survey.

Parental choice can be viewed as a distinctly sequential process most easily discussed with parents in the same order in which they make their decisions.. A questionnaire should maximise the interest of parents when it allows them to ‘tell their story’ of how they chose a place for their child and the sequential structure may aid recall of events. The questionnaire (Appendix 4) was therefore designed accordingly. The broad structure is:

- Introduction
- Sources of information
- Educational values of parents
- The decision-making process (with a focus on the extent of perceived choice)
- The outcome of the choice process
- The extent of parental satisfaction with that outcome
- Transport to the new school
- Parents’ general view of the choice system
- An opportunity for parents to raise any issues they feel relevant and not already covered.

A mix of question types (open, closed and Likert scale) was used; all were kept simple and short to maintain interest. The questionnaire was intended, in most cases, to be completed in half an hour. In line with Oppenheim's (1986) recommendations, the first questions are easy and impersonal with the more sensitive categorical questions, such as age and occupation, kept until the end of the interview. The questionnaire was piloted with nine parents to ensure the intelligibility, lack of ambiguity and logical flow of questions. Some very minor amendments were made in question order and wording at this stage, but there were no substantive changes to the following design.

Questionnaire introduction.

This was designed to put interviewees at ease, to explain the purpose of the study, to let them know that the interview would last about half an hour and to gain their permission for use of the tape-recorder.

Sources of information

These questions were designed as ice-breakers - simple to answer so that the interviewee would be relaxed before answering the more demanding questions about values in school choice that follow. The question on the number of Open Days/Evenings they attended focused their attention on the choice process and acted as a rough indicator of how widespread their search procedure was. The questions that followed on their satisfaction with the year-6 transfer information handbook and with the LEA were inserted at LEA request to provide feedback on the extent of parental satisfaction with their service. This was a small *quid pro quo* for their considerable assistance in facilitating the survey as well as providing potentially useful information about the value of the LEA's operation of the transfer process for different parental groups. The final part of this section sought to

identify the most important sources of information used by parents. The six examples of information sources given to parents were those identified as most commonly cited in various previous studies into parental choice (including Stillman & Maychell (1986), University of Glasgow (1986), Bastow (1991), Jowett (1995)) though parents were encouraged to mention any other sources that they used. Interviewees were asked to identify the two most important information sources contributing to their choice, partly to provide a simple comparative measure and partly to encourage them to think more deeply about the choice process before proceeding to the central part of the questionnaire. It was hypothesised that parents choosing out-of-catchment schools, and particular social groups, use different information sources to the rest of the population.

The decision-making process

This section of the questionnaire starts with questions about the qualities in secondary schools that parents value irrespective of the choices actually available to them. Again, the examples of potential factors in school-choice were garnered from those that featured most prominently in the literature. In accordance with the view that there is rarely a one-to-one relationship between agreement with statements and people's attitudes (Bailey, 1987), a selection of seven attitudinal statements was provided. A three-point Likert scale accompanied each statement so that the expected difference in values between those choosing the local comprehensive school and those choosing grammar schools, for example, could be identified.

Parents were also asked the type of school (single-sex, grammar, etc.) they preferred their children to attend in an ideal world. Interviewees were allowed to put forward factors in choice that had not been listed. Of course, parents might happily agree that all the factors mentioned were very important in choice of school and thus provide little information to

the researcher. Therefore, the last question in this sub-section asked for the most important factor in an ideal choice of school. It was believed that this question would most clearly differentiate between parents guided by academic ambition on behalf of their child, for example, and those more concerned with the child's happiness. In the course of the survey a significant number of parents refused to nominate a single reason, as they were more concerned that a school be strong according a number of different criteria than it should be excellent for one thing. Parents were never prompted for this sort of answer, to guard against its use as an easy option, but if they were insistent about not identifying a single reason as most important then their response was categorised as 'a balance of different reasons'.

The choice process

The interview now progresses to the core of the questionnaire - the selection of the preferred school. In order to avoid structuring parents' responses for them, they were first asked to describe, in their own words, how they went about choosing their child's school. A series of questions followed, designed to elicit both the depth and extent of choice available to individual parents. First they were asked which schools were basically acceptable to their child - all schools that were accessible and considered suitable. A list of schools was shown to parents in case their memory needed jogging. They were then asked which schools they seriously considered - the set of schools from which they effectively made their final choice. Then they were asked for the first preference that they gave to the LEA - their nominal first choice. They were also asked what the final 'tipping' factor was in favour of this first preference. This might be very different from the sort of criteria discussed when considering the ideal choice of school - parents might be choosing between two schools of similar academic qualities and here apparently minor factors of convenience

could become crucial in reaching a final decision. Finally, parents were asked whether they would have ideally preferred a different first choice and if so, why.

Through the use of this funnelling process, it was hoped that the variation in choice available to parents in different locations and social groups would be revealed. This is, of course, perceived choice - the map of an individual parent's 'landscape of choice' in the terms of Bowe *et al* (1995). Parents who favoured the local comprehensive and saw no need to look elsewhere might possess a simple, sparse view of the quantity and quality of alternative schools, of the types of pupils they attracted and of the ease with which places could be secured. Parents prepared for their child to travel long distances and with strong views on academic standards or discipline are likely to build a mental map of this landscape of choice that is substantially more extensive and detailed.

The outcome of the choice process

This section poses questions about the outcome of the choice process. Parents who failed to secure their first choice were of particular interest. One of the advantages of using interviews rather than a postal questionnaire was the ability to discuss in depth the causes and consequences of this outcome. Parents were asked to rate the quality of their first preference school and, if appropriate, the school which their child eventually attended. The responses to these questions allowed an evaluation of the relative impact of failure in the first stage of the transfer process. They were also asked how sure they were of securing their first preference and how difficult they found the whole decision-making process. These questions allowed analysis of variation in stress amongst parents negotiating the transfer system. Finally, the secondary school destinations of elder siblings and friends are

potentially crucial explanatory variables in school choice and parents were asked to provide relevant details.

Transport to school

The GIS analysis examined the influence of home-school journey length on choice of school. However, the ‘as the crow flies’ measure adopted, in lieu of a more detailed route network analysis, may not reflect the reality of such journeys, potentially influenced by factors such as physical boundaries, type of transport used, bus routes and personal safety. A section was therefore included in the questionnaire to address the importance of convenience and transport - the practicalities of getting to school.

Parents were asked how their child would normally travel to school, this information providing the opportunity to analyse the difference in transport usage by parents choosing the local school and schools outside the catchment. They were then asked which school was nearest in terms of the time taken to get there. If this was not the first preference school, they were asked why not. In some respects this question belongs in the section on the choice process, but the reasons for rejection of the local school are likely to be complex and there may be a temptation for the parents to give a ‘socially acceptable’ answer rather than their true feelings. Leaving this crucial question to later in the interview increases the chances of a more relaxed parent giving an honest answer.

This section finishes with a question about the importance of the local secondary school in the parents’ choice of home. Here the extent to which parents are choosing their homes in the catchments of favoured secondary schools, an indirect method of parental choice, can be captured.

General questions.

The main part of the questionnaire finishes with two general questions. First, parents are asked their opinion of the LEA's choice system and for the reasons underlying any strong adverse views. This question allows both the extent of overall dis-satisfaction with the Eastland transfer system to be expressed, and allows categorisation of the different reasons for such dis-satisfaction; finally, parents are asked for any further comments they wish to make.

Categorical questions

Besides the standard categorical questions relating to age, occupation, marital status and car ownership, parents were asked the type of secondary school they attended so that any relationship between school choice and parental educational background. They were not asked for the highest level of educational qualification that they attained. In retrospect, this question would have proved valuable in further explaining any relationship between parents' educational background and school choice.

The interview ended with an offer of further information about the research, if the parents desired it.

7.3. Survey sampling strategy.

This section describes the design and rationale for the survey sampling strategy. First, the reasons are given for choosing the parents of the 1995 rather than the 1994 pupil cohort as the population to be interviewed. A justification for the chosen sample size is followed by an outline of the stratified sampling method that was adopted. Finally, there is discussion of the need to secure interviews with various sub-groups.

The first decision to be made was whether to sample parents of the 1994 or 1995 year-6 pupil cohorts. Interviews could start in March 1995, a year and three months after the start of the PhD research, at the earliest. If the 1994 cohort was chosen then the interviews would have been undertaken well over a year after the decision-making process was completed, in most cases. For the 1995 cohort the transfer process would be much easier to recall and parents less prone to post-hoc rationalisation. A further argument in favour of using the 1995 cohort was the fact that parents were considered more likely to be interested in responding to a request for interview when the topic to be discussed was in the very recent past.

There were, however, arguments in favour of using the 1994 cohort. All parents would have completed the choice process, whereas for the 1995 cohort some parents might still be negotiating the appeals procedure. Using the 1995 cohort, those parents who were involved in the much more recent February round of allocations might be much more agitated about the transfer process than those who had their preferences satisfied in November. For the 1994 cohort, the relative difference between the times that had passed since parents had made their decisions would be much smaller. Finally, at the time of the survey the LEA had supplied pupil postcode data for the 1994 cohort but not for the following year. Consequently, any interesting patterns in pupil movement discovered in the GIS analysis could be discussed with parents of the 1994 cohort but not those of the 1995 intake. Overall, though, the arguments in favour of using the 1995 cohort appeared stronger, and that was the population sampled. The next issue to be considered was the number of parents to be interviewed.

Sample size was dictated principally by the realities of resource availability, rather than on strict statistical grounds. As well as time, car-hire costs were a consideration, with a

significant proportion of interviewees in relatively far-flung rural locations. A period of eight weeks intensive interviewing was seen as a reasonable expenditure of time and effort on the survey. The sample size was calculated as follows: two months of full-time interviewing assuming an average of 3 interviews a day produces a total of 160 -170. This is not large enough for statistical generalisation to the total population of over 4000 parents if all the contextual factors such as location, socio-economic status, gender, type of school chosen, etc. are taken into account. However, it is sufficient for worthwhile exploratory analysis, particularly in the context of the comprehensive data on simple pupil movement provided by the GIS and the ability to put the results of the parental survey in the context of that analysis.

This restriction on sample-size highlighted the importance of the inclusion of all significant population sub-groups in the final sample so that important issues in the choice process were not over-looked. Spatial variation in the expression of parental choice is a central theme of this thesis and it was therefore decided to stratify the sample by the child's home catchment (see section 7.4 for description of how this was done). It was anticipated that the variation in the geographical and socio-economic characteristics of the different catchment populations would produce significant variation in response rates. A multi-stage sampling strategy was therefore chosen so that catchments with lower response-rates in the first sample (and pilot) could be proportionately over-sampled in the final phase, thus guarding against over and under-representation of particular catchment-types in the final response set.

Such a strategy does more than attempt to guarantee the capture of all relevant geographical contexts for parents in the sample. The considerable variation in the socio-economic characteristics of the various catchment populations should help to ensure that

important sub-groups are adequately represented. However, with the strong possibility of a biased response to the invitations to parents for interview, adequate representation could not be assumed for such groups.

The following categories were identified as likely to be important in the analysis of the survey results:

- geographical character of school catchment (rural, suburban, urban)
- child gender
- parents choosing schools inside or outside the home catchment
- parents of children taking the 11 plus
- parents choosing denominational schools
- neighbourhood classification of parents' home

The implementation of further stratification to accommodate all these categories would have been excessively difficult. The parental choice system is so complex and subject to large variation, both spatially and socio-economically, that such a small survey could never statistically test the full range of interesting hypotheses. Whilst the survey has important explanatory potential, much of its value lies in its exploratory character with the qualitative information provided in relation to the various questions helpful, both in terms of the current research and as a pointer to future research possibilities. In this context, a precisely balanced sample is an ideal rather than a necessity, provided that the extent of any sample bias is acknowledged.

The approach chosen, monitoring of response-rates at each stage for each of the categories identified above, allowed consideration of ameliorative action if any were grossly under-represented. The problems involved in analysing a response-set with so many contextual variables are discussed later in this chapter.

162 parents participated in the survey. The expected and actual numbers of parents interviewed in each category are set out in Table 7.1. The under-sampling of rural parents and over-sampling of Old Northwick parents was deliberate. The lack of choice available to many parents living in rural catchments was likely to lead to a much more homogenous response than that given by those of parents in locations where the choices were much more complex (as indeed proved the case). Consequently, a lower target of 25 parents was set for this category of parent and the balance added to the Old Northwick sample. The complexity of choice is much the greatest in Old Northwick and as large a sample as possible is needed there in order to allow a reasonable degree of sensitivity in the analysis. The excess of those choosing an out-of-catchment school was expected. Parents making such choices probably have thought more deeply about their child's educational future and are therefore more likely to respond to a request for an interview about their choice. The influence of parents making out-of-catchment choices on patterns of movement within the system is of particular interest and the method of analysis chosen accommodates such a bias (see below), so it is acceptable. Similarly, those taking the 11-plus and choosing denominational schools are over-represented. This partially reflects the over-sampling of Old Northwick and provides more information about an important sub-group of parents than would otherwise be available.

Most pleasingly, the social balance of the sample appears to be reasonably consistent with that of the population of year-6 parents held within the GIS. It was expected that lower-

status parents would be significantly under-represented and, although there is an under-response from parents in ‘struggling’ neighbourhoods, this is not as large as was expected and the ‘stratification by catchment’ approach does appear to have produced a reasonably representative sample. However, as the response of parents choosing out-of-catchment schools reveals, an element of self-selection is difficult to avoid in this sort of survey. Any interpretation of the results should be mindful of the probability that those who responded, whether working or middle-class, urban or rural, are likely to be those most interested in their children’s education. Overall, though, the table shows that ‘deviations’ are generally modest in scale and not sufficient seriously to invalidate the sample as a whole.

Category	Expected % (n)		Actual % (n)	
Rural catchment	20	(32)	16	(25)
New Northwick catchments	18	(30)	16	(25)
Old Northwick catchments	62	(99)	69	(111)
Male pupil	51	(81)	47	(76)
Out-of-catchment choice	39	(62)	54	(87)
Choosing a denominational school	6	(10)	10	(16)
Taking 11-plus	11	(18)	19	(30)
Social characterisation of neighbourhood*				
Struggling	29	(47)	21	(34)
Aspiring	24	(39)	25	(40)
Established	28	(45)	31	(50)
Climbing	13	(21)	15	(24)
Prospering	5	(9)	8	(13)

Table 7.1 - Comparison of prevalence of various sub-groups in total population and final sample

*Social characterisation derived from GB Profiles - see section 5.7 for further details.

7.4. Conduct of survey.

This section describes the practical implementation of the parental survey. The consequences of the constraints imposed by the LEA on the conduct of the survey are

described. Discussions of the piloting of the survey, interview scheduling, and the mechanics of sample selection are followed by reflections on the suitability of the chosen survey format.

The response rate and numbers interviewed in each phase are shown in Table 7.2. The nine interviews using the pilot questionnaire proved satisfactory with only very minor amendments to question wording and order necessary. Consequently, these questionnaires were included in the overall analysis. In the next phase of the survey pupils’ IDs were randomly selected from the full 1995 cohort, with the sample stratified so that each secondary school’s catchment was represented by a number of IDs proportional to the total number of pupils in the area. The IDs were then given to the LEA who sent out 232 letters to parents. These letters contained reply-paid envelopes and pro-formas enabling parents to show their willingness to be interviewed (see Appendix 5). The author successfully telephoned 45 of the parents who responded to arrange a mutually convenient time to interview them. The LEA required this procedure as they felt that their duty of confidentiality precluded them from providing parents’ addresses to outside researchers.

	Pilot	Stage 1	Stage 2
ID given to LEA	37	236	550
Reply received	10	47	133
Response rate	27%	20%	24%
Interview undertaken	9	45	109

Table 7.2 - Survey response and interview rates

After these interviews a second batch of letters was sent out to parents. Again, prospective interviewees were randomly selected from within catchments. The number of letters sent for each catchment was calculated on the basis of the response rate for the first sample, so that, if the response rate was repeated, each designated area would provide an

approximately representative number of interviewees in the overall sample. Following telephone contacts, 107 interviews were completed in this phase giving a total of 162. Twenty four parents were not interviewed in this phase, either because it was impossible to arrange a suitable appointment or because they lived in a catchment that had been over-sampled. The higher response rate in the last sample was surprising in view of the over-sampling of catchments that were under-represented in the first stage.

The LEA's insistence on requests for interview being channelled through them resulted in an indirect, official, formal, slightly convoluted approach that may have reduced the response rate. This could either have resulted from the complexity of the method of arranging an interview or from wariness of LEA involvement in the survey, even though the confidentiality of interviewee responses was guaranteed. Parents were offered interviews at any time of the week or day, and the majority of interviews took place in the evenings or at weekends. This flexibility ensured that almost all parents who indicated their willingness were, in fact, interviewed. Four selected parents were not on the phone. In these cases they were visited at home and interviewed immediately or an appointment made for later.

The interviews themselves were highly productive and the interviewees generally seemed to be happy that the questionnaire fully covered their experience of the choice process with few adding any further information when invited at the end of the interview. Whilst some parents only gave brief responses to questions, most were happy to expand on the background to their decisions and a significant proportion expressed considerable emotion in talking about what were sometimes traumatic experiences. At times the flow of the questionnaire would be lost as a particular issue was developed but the structure of the questionnaire ensured that the relevant information was recorded. Use of the tape-recorder,

to which no parent objected, was sometimes valuable in accurately recording parents' views.

The desired analysis of the survey results was, of course, a key consideration when the questionnaire was designed. The planned analysis is now described in the light of the statistical limitations imposed by the sample size and structure.

7.5 Analysis of data

Questionnaire responses were keyed into the Microsoft Access database thus allowing pupil information derived from the survey to be linked with the relevant GIS and LEA data. The answers to open questions were categorised and coded accordingly. After the complete details from each questionnaire had been entered into the database, the data were transferred into the SPSS software package within which any statistical analysis was performed. The initial analysis consisted of the production of simple frequency tables for the various questionnaire responses. These provided a framework for a high-level overview of the way that parents go about choosing a school.

However, given the contextual importance of factors such as geographical location, type of school sought and socio-economic background, there is an inevitable loss of sensitivity as a result of over-aggregation. Therefore the bulk of the analysis focuses on particular sub-groups rather than the overall aggregate level. To this end, a series of tables were produced to structure the analysis, as well as allowing χ^2 tests, where appropriate. Additionally, the analysis had to address the biases in the sample, noted above. The main biases were in favour of those choosing out-of-catchment schools (including grammar and denominational schools). To accommodate this, the data were aggregated into tables relating the type of school chosen (local comprehensive, out-of-catchment comprehensive, grammar and denominational school) to the individual questionnaire responses. Variation

according to geographical location or social status amongst those choosing a particular school-type was checked for and reported where noteworthy. Thus, there was no bias in the final tables. A full description of the analysis is contained in the following chapter.

7.6 Summary

The strength of this survey lies in its comprehensive geographical coverage and its social balance. It is unlikely that any major issue affecting parental choice in Eastland was missed. A complex view was formed of the various ways that parents went about choosing a school and the values and information that informed such decisions. In particular, the questionnaire enabled evaluation of variation in the perceived extent of choice and in the importance of geographical context as an influence on decision-making processes.

The major limitation of the survey is its size. Statistical inference about a variety of interesting hypotheses is impossible because of the small numbers involved when parents' actions or views are analysed in all the appropriate contexts (location, type of school sought, social status, own educational background, etc). A postal survey might have been more useful in this respect but could not have been as sophisticated in teasing out the various components of the choice-making process.

It is important to remember, though, that this survey is not the only important data source in this thesis. The GIS analysis provides a comprehensive picture of pupil movements in the study period. The data provided by this survey of parents give a considerable degree of added-value to that analysis and on its own provides the diverse and detail-rich picture of the reality of secondary school choice in Eastland in 1994/1995 described in the following chapter.

Chapter Eight. Social and spatial variation in secondary school choice processes: analysis of a survey of parents.

8.1 Introduction.

The survey of parents undertaken as part of this research fulfils two main functions. First, it adds value to the GIS analysis, described in Chapter Six, by linking the statistical data on inter-catchment movements to individual decision-making processes. It considerably aids explanation of the interesting patterns of pupil movement revealed by the GIS analysis. Additionally, it guards against instances of the ecological fallacy by confirming, for instance, the extent to which parents choosing out-of-catchment schools (identified in the survey) are typical of the social status of their home neighbourhood (as identified in the GIS analysis). Second, the interviews provided a wealth of information on how parents in different geographical and social contexts went about choosing a school for their child; information not available elsewhere. The collected interview responses provide a fascinating picture of the variety, complexity and inter-relatedness of choice-making processes in Eastland. Consequently, observations on the underlying causation of the dynamics and character of inter-catchment flows can be made with a confidence not possible on the basis of the GIS analysis alone.

The previous chapter described the extent to which the sample appears numerically representative of the wider parent population. However, no matter how successful the sampling is, in this respect any statistical analysis must primarily be exploratory. The contextual basis of many parents' decision-making process is far too elaborate to enable more than a limited use of inferential statistics with small samples. Some population sub-groups are so small (e.g. 30 choosing grammar schools, 16 choosing denominational schools, 17 unemployed) that only the strongest relationships will produce statistically

significant results. This is not necessarily a major disadvantage. The complexity and contextuality of school-choice is such that, even with a much larger survey, it would be extremely difficult to produce a useful, generalisable model. A sound qualitative understanding of parental motives and aspirations may well be much more important in explaining current and past pupil flows and predicting those of the future.

Notwithstanding these considerations, it is important to indicate the statistical reliability of the findings presented in this chapter. Whenever characteristics of population sub-groups are contrasted, the comparisons are annotated according to the probability that a finding is untrue (the significance level derived from the appropriate χ^2 test). A probability of less than 1% that a finding is untrue for the general population (as represented by the p-value of a χ^2 statistic) is indicated by the annotation (**). For probabilities between 1% and 5%, and above 5%, the annotations are (*) and (n.s., meaning not significant) respectively.

This chapter is structured around a set of questions (listed below) that could not be fully answered by the GIS analysis and were addressed by this survey:

- How do parents go about choosing secondary school for their child?
- What characterises parents choosing a local catchment comprehensive school?
- What characterises parents choosing an out-of-catchment comprehensive school?
- What characterises parents choosing a grammar school?
- What characterises parents choosing a denominational school?
- What other issues of relevance to this thesis, that have not been answered by the GIS analysis, can be clarified by the survey?

With all these questions, the importance of social and spatial contexts to school-choice is evaluated by comparing parents' occupations through the Registrar-General's standard

classification and by comparing the responses of parents in Old Northwick, New Northwick and the rural hinterland.

8.2 The school choice process for Eastland parents.

8.2.1 Introduction.

The GIS analysis revealed the spatio-temporal dynamics of parental choice in Eastland. The focus now moves to the parental decision-making mechanisms which produced the patterns of flows of pupils between catchments identified in Chapter Six - flows which may themselves influence parents in their choices.

The following questions are considered in the light of parental interview responses:

- How do parents, typically, go about choosing a school for their child?
- What information sources do they use?
- What factors are important to them in choosing a school?
- How wide is the range of schools from which they make their choice?
- How satisfied are they with their choice and with the secondary transfer as a whole?
- How important was the availability of transport in determining parental choices?
- What influence did the destinations of older siblings have on secondary school choices?

Socio-spatial variation in parental responses is identified in the discussion of these questions. Issues relating to choice of particular school types are generally left to later sections.

8.2.2 The selection process.

Typically, there is a two-stage choice process for parents - consultation with friends, family and child that establishes a short list and first preference, followed by attendance at an open day/evening to confirm that their first choice is suitable for their child. Parents may possibly attend one other open day/evening to check that an alternative is not more suitable. There are, of course, many variations and exceptions to this pattern. Parents may be very sure of their first preference several years before they have to express it. They might still attend an open day/evening but only to introduce themselves and their child to the school with no intention of evaluating it. At the other end of the spectrum, some parents, even if they have consulted friends, may be genuinely unsure of the best school for their child. They may extensively research league tables and prospectuses, attending as many as six or more open day/evenings in a carefully thought out strategy of choice.

Parents can also be divided between the 40% who seriously consider only one school which presumably satisfies their minimum requirements for their child - 'satisficers' -and those who identify all the suitable schools that are reasonably accessible and choose the one that best fulfils their choice criteria - 'optimisers'. 'Optimising' parents with wide search strategies are clearly in the minority, with less than 20% seriously considering more than two options, but they are of relatively greater interest to schools as they are more likely to be attracted by appropriate marketing. On the whole, though, the 'community grapevine' retains its pre-eminence amongst the influences on school choice, with a school's general reputation in a particular location more important than, for example, its league table performance.

For parents who are dis-satisfied with the local school there is often a 'standard' alternative that is considered suitable through a combination, perhaps, of tradition, bus-routes and

availability of places. In these circumstances part of the *de jure* catchment of one school has become the *de facto* catchment of another. There were several examples of this pattern identified in Eastland but it was more common for parents to reject a local catchment school that was the preferred choice of the majority of their neighbours. Further consideration of parents choosing out-of-catchment schools follows later in the chapter.

Parents' perceptions of secondary schools, probably gained through the community grapevine, were often seen by the schools as unjustified or out of date. Open days/evenings provided the easiest way to counteract such views. Many parents, attending such events in order to make a genuine choice, were strongly influenced by the impression made by the Head, other teachers and, especially, the pupils. The number of open days/evenings attended by parents also provides a useful surrogate for the extent to which they seriously considered alternatives to the local school.

There is much geographic and social-economic variation in these models. The obvious spatial isolation of rural catchments is reflected in lower rates of open day/evening attendance (a mean of 1.3 open days/evenings attended compared with 1.6 for New Northwick and 1.8 for Old Northwick (**)). This pattern corresponds to that for the number of schools seriously considered by parents (means of 1.3, 1.8 and 2.0 respectively(**)). Only one of the 25 rural parents did not attend a single open day/evening. However, less than 20% of rural parents attend two or more open day/evenings, suggesting that few of these parents are making an active choice. In comparison, 56% of parents in New Northwick and 51.8% in Old Northwick attend two or more open days/evenings (**).

Despite these figures, choice processes tend to be much simpler in New Northwick. Here most parents are choosing between the two local comprehensive schools in each suburb and few attend open days/evenings outside their local area (apart from grammar school

applicants). In Old Northwick, on the other hand, there are more parents making wide choices - about 25% attending 3 or more open days/evenings (**).

The occupational classification of parents interviewed was assigned according to which parent, resident at the address, had the higher status occupation according to the Registrar-General's standard classification. Active choice of secondary school, as measured by open day/evening attendance, was least widespread amongst the unemployed and classes IV and V. The highest rate of attendance was by class IIIa parents who attended a mean of 1.9 open day/evenings compared with 1.1 for classes I and II (*). This finding of maximum expression of active choice amongst intermediate social groups was replicated throughout this survey and is explained later in this chapter. However, all social strata show commitment to the participation process as only amongst the unemployed does the proportion of parents who fail to attend any open day/evening rise above 20% of the sample.

In summary, even parents who have little choice, or have strong views on their first preference, are likely to participate in the transfer process to the extent of attending at least one open day/evening. Those parents most likely to follow highly active choice processes live in Old Northwick and are more likely to be of intermediate social status.

8.2.3 Information Sources.

Parents' choice of secondary school will inevitably be influenced strongly by the information sources contributing to that decision. The variation in the quality and accuracy of information, available to parents about secondary schools in general, will affect their ability to make an optimal choice for their child. Furthermore, variation in the quantity of information available to parents about particular schools is likely to be a major contributory factor to the extent of parents' 'landscape of choice'. Parents relying on friends in the local

neighbourhood are likely to have a more restricted choice than those relying on league tables covering the whole of Eastland.

In line with the two-step procedure by which most parents said that they chose schools, open days/evenings were mentioned as the most important information source by 44% of parents and friends by 29% (*) (see Figure 8.2.1). Friends were primarily important as a conduit for the community grapevine, acting as a means of creating a set of schools from which to choose. League tables were seldom mentioned as important by any parent - the small number who did were, on the whole, 'optimisers' who were considering all reasonably accessible schools. Parents were generally aware of schools with better academic reputations, but usually through the 'grapevine' rather than through detailed inspection of GCSE or 'A' level league tables.

One information source whose importance was stressed in several interviews was the visible behaviour of children attending the neighbourhood schools. In one case, some parents in catchment 'A' chose a neighbouring comprehensive in catchment 'B' on the grounds of the perceived bad behaviour of children attending the local school, whilst parents in catchment 'B' chose the catchment 'A' school for precisely the same reason. This example is a good illustration of the way parents' views on schools can be very subjective and based on negative rather than positive criteria.

An information source that was not suggested to parents in the survey interview, but which appeared quite significant, was the opinion of 'insiders'. A typical example would be the knowledge gained by friends working in primary or secondary schools, not necessarily as teachers. Such knowledge was considered important by the parents concerned, irrespective of the capacity in which they worked, and was also a valued source of information by

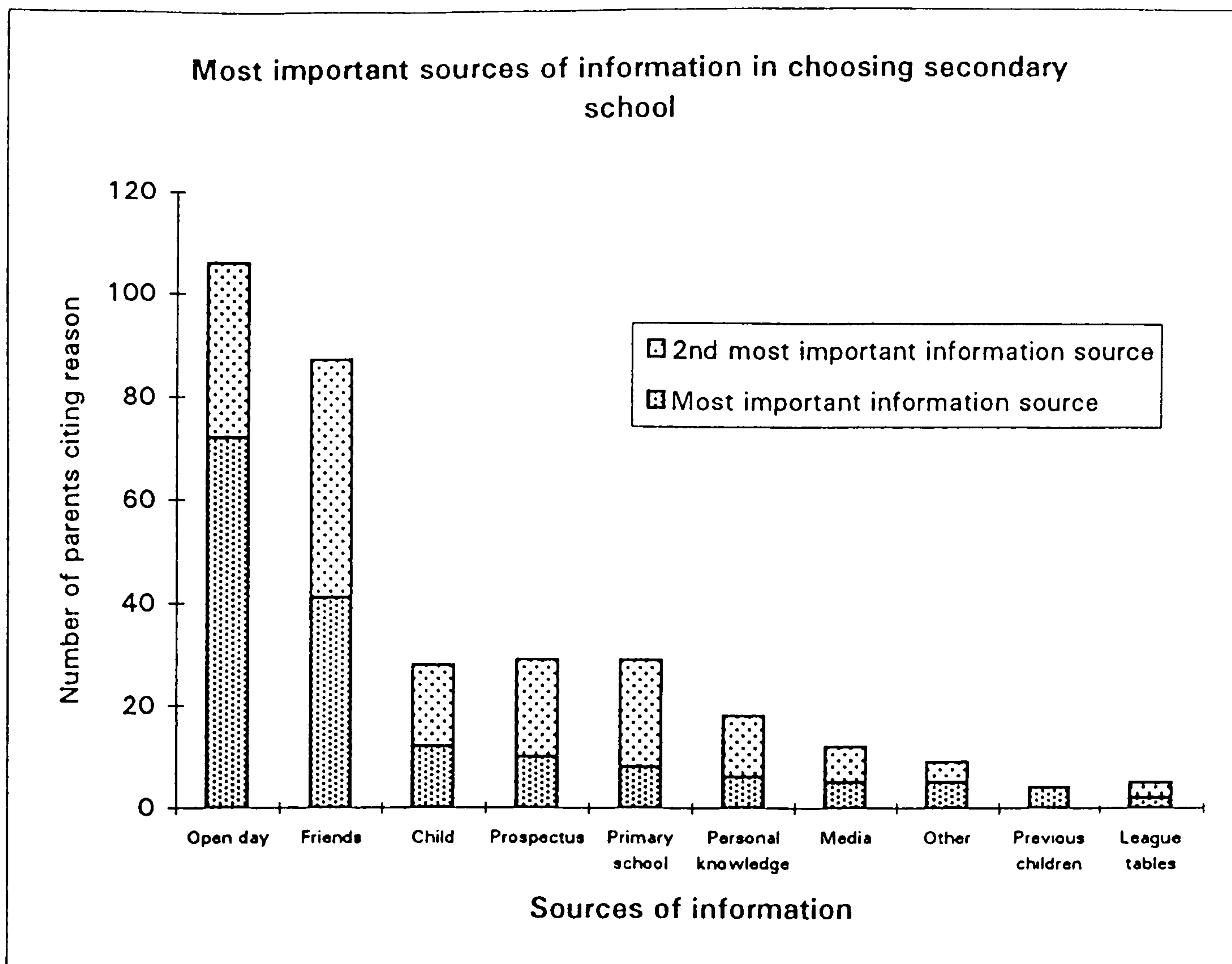


Figure 8.2.1

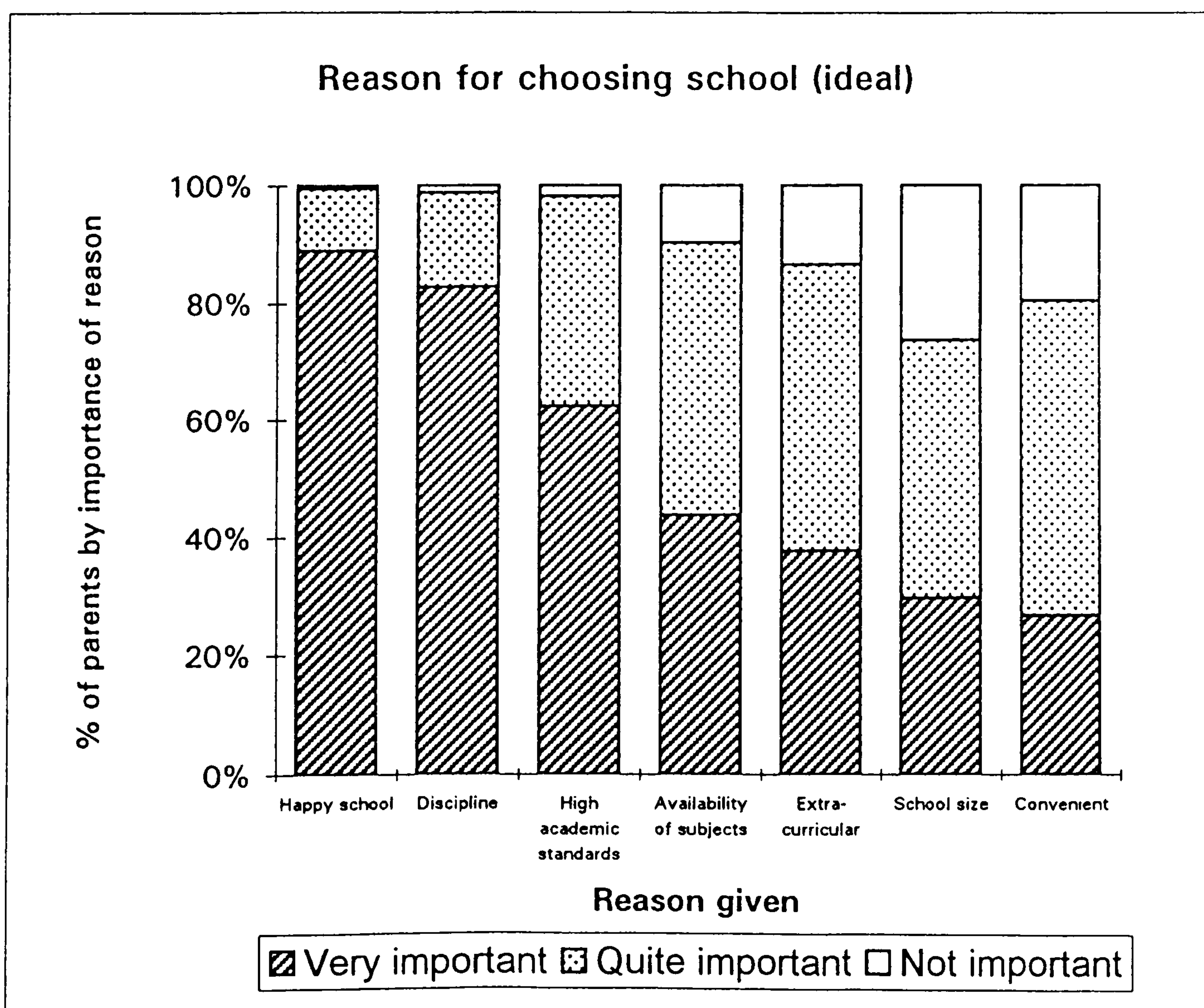


Figure 8.2.2

friends making their preference selection. The media and primary schools, like league tables, rarely featured as important influences.

Perhaps surprisingly, despite their apparent lack of choice, rural parents were more likely to attend an open day/evening than those in the more deprived parts of Old Northwick (though urban parents attending such events were likely to attend more of them). In New Northwick, where parents were generally choosing between two local schools, the prospectus assumed a greater importance, in combination with the open day/evening. However, there was not a great degree of variation between locations in the influences on choice.

There was rather more differentiation between the various occupational groups in this respect. Classes IV and V were more likely to cite the prospectus as an important information source (*) (25% said it was the 1st or 2nd most important). The open day/evening was least important for the unemployed (*). For some lone parents, who formed a large proportion of the unemployed, this reflected a practical inability to get to all the sessions that they wished to attend. For the unemployed and parents in occupational classes IV and V, friends were the most important information source for about 45% of parents, with the other groups rating them most important in less than 25% of cases (**).

Overall, although open days/evenings were more important for parents of higher social status, and for those who lived outside the deprived parts of Old Northwick (where friends were more likely to be influential), all groups regularly placed open days/evenings as first or second most important information source. League tables, though used by a few, were much less important than a school's general reputation as a factor in parents' choice. The greater emphasis on friends and the local community for information amongst parents in the

more deprived catchments was likely to reduce the extent of choice available to them.

8.2.4 Reasons for choice of school.

This section is concerned with identifying the qualities of a secondary school that parents consider most important, when assessing its suitability for their child, irrespective of the actual choices available to them. Parents were first asked how important they considered particular attributes were in their choice of a school and then what they considered the single most important factor in choosing a secondary school. With decision-making processes such as these, some parents may be giving answers that they feel are perceived as socially 'acceptable' rather than their honest responses. Equally, having made their decision, they may have rationalised their motives so that their choice appears a logical outcome of their child's needs. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly much truth in parents' responses and the socio-spatial variation in parents' views can provide valuable insights into the operation of parental choice.

When they were asked how important different factors were in an ideal choice of school, parents revealed their great concern with their children's happiness and security (see Figure 8.2.2). Almost 90% of interviewees considered choice of a school with a 'happy atmosphere' very important whilst over 80% of parents similarly rated 'discipline' as a factor in school choice. This was particularly the case if parents believed that bullying had been a problem at primary school for their child, whilst other parents were most concerned that their child should work in a disciplined environment 'for their own good'. Fewer parents (about 60%) saw academic standards as 'very important' (**), though the proportion varied considerably, apparently influenced by the extent and quality of choice available to parents (see below for discussion of this point).

These interviews tended to reflect the evidence of previous research (e.g. Bastow, 1991) that working-class parents give greater priority to their child's happiness while middle-class parents are more concerned with academic standards. However, this was by no means clear-cut. Perhaps surprisingly, there was much less variation between occupational groups than within them in the value they assigned to each reason. Strikingly, parents in rural areas ascribe far lower importance to academic criteria in choice (37% = very important) compared with Old and New Northwick (69% and 60% respectively) (*). For many of these rural parents, the only alternatives to the local catchment comprehensive are likely to be an expensive private school or a long journey to an urban grammar. In this context, those who (often unavoidably) choose the local comprehensive are unlikely to have academic criteria uppermost in their minds.

At first sight, the importance attached to academic criteria varies substantially between social groups (56% to 71%). However, this difference cannot be shown to be statistically significant. This clear lack of a strong, statistically significant relationship, between parents' social status and the importance attributed to academic criteria, is surprising. In contrast, Woods (1996) found that middle-class parents in his study were more likely to cite standard of academic education as a reason for choosing a school. The finding in this study may reflect the fact that, for parents of higher socio-economic status living in affluent neighbourhoods, the local comprehensive is much more likely to boast a level of academic performance standards that is perceived as acceptable than is the case with parents living in more deprived catchments. In other words, all schools in the 'landscape of choice' of most middle-class parents living in suburban or rural catchments perform to an acceptable academic standard and GCSE and 'A' level results are, thus, less important for them as a

factor in differentiating between schools.

Clearly, although parents were asked to consider an ideal choice, they were influenced in their responses by the 'real world' context from which their individual choice possibilities arose. Academic criteria tend to be highlighted when the results of the local school are perceived as weak and alternatives are available - not the case with most rural parents but very relevant in many Old Northwick catchments. Attitudes to single-sex education support this view of parental rationalisation. 25% of parents positively prefer single-sex schooling for their child in Old Northwick, where it is available, compared with none in New Northwick and 8% in rural catchments where it is absent (*). Finally, convenience is a much more important factor for rural parents (46% say it is very important compared with 23% and 28% of Old and New Northwick parents (**)).

Other types of differentiation between parents in the same location or social group in their attitude to school choice were apparent. Amongst the sample there were 'satisficers' and 'optimisers', parents happy and unhappy with the local school, parents placing academic progress higher or lower than the child's personal happiness. In all groups there were parents who based their choice of school on the characteristics of their child and would choose different schools for different children. This variety of approach to choice was more striking than differences between social groups. The ability of a parent to achieve their goals, on the other hand, can vary considerably - the advantage of middle-class 'cultural capital' in negotiating the transfer procedures (as described by Gewirtz *et al*, 1995) was often in evidence, particularly when it came to appeal processes. Parents who failed to achieve their first preference for their child at the first attempt and were confident in their ability to achieve it through sheer determination were, almost without exception, middle-class.

When parents were asked which factor in an ideal choice of school they considered most important (see Figure 8.2.3) the responses apparently contradicted those given when parents were asked to rate the importance of various specific factors in choice (Figure 8.2.2). Evaluation of the factors that parents rate ‘very important’ in an ideal choice of school appeared to place ‘child-centred’ considerations of ‘happy’ and ‘disciplined’ school environments above academic considerations for the majority. However, when parents were asked which single factor they considered *most important* in ideal choice, easily the most popular response, cited by 35% of parents, was ‘academic standards’. This total was greater than for the number of parents combined who considered ‘discipline’ or ‘happy school atmosphere’ the most important factor in choice. The explanation for this apparent contradiction is that when a parent rates the academic criterion as very important then it is very likely to be considered the most important factor. Parents rating ‘school atmosphere’ or ‘discipline’ as very important are much likelier to consider another factor as most important. In particular, a large number of parents were unable to nominate one factor above all others, feeling that a balance between academic standards and a child’s happiness, and other factors such as extra-curricular activities, was preferable to a strength in one aspect alone.

However, putting the child’s needs first is likely to produce different outcomes in different social groups. Middle-class children are more likely to be academic because of their family background, while parents of children in more deprived areas may be more concerned that they attend the same school as their friends. Parents were, on the whole, willing to consider any type of school if they thought it would benefit their child and reject a school type for which they had a strong ideological preference if they thought attendance there would mean unhappiness for their child. Denominational schools were an exception, with 24% of parents preferring not to send their children to this type of school while less than 5% of parents

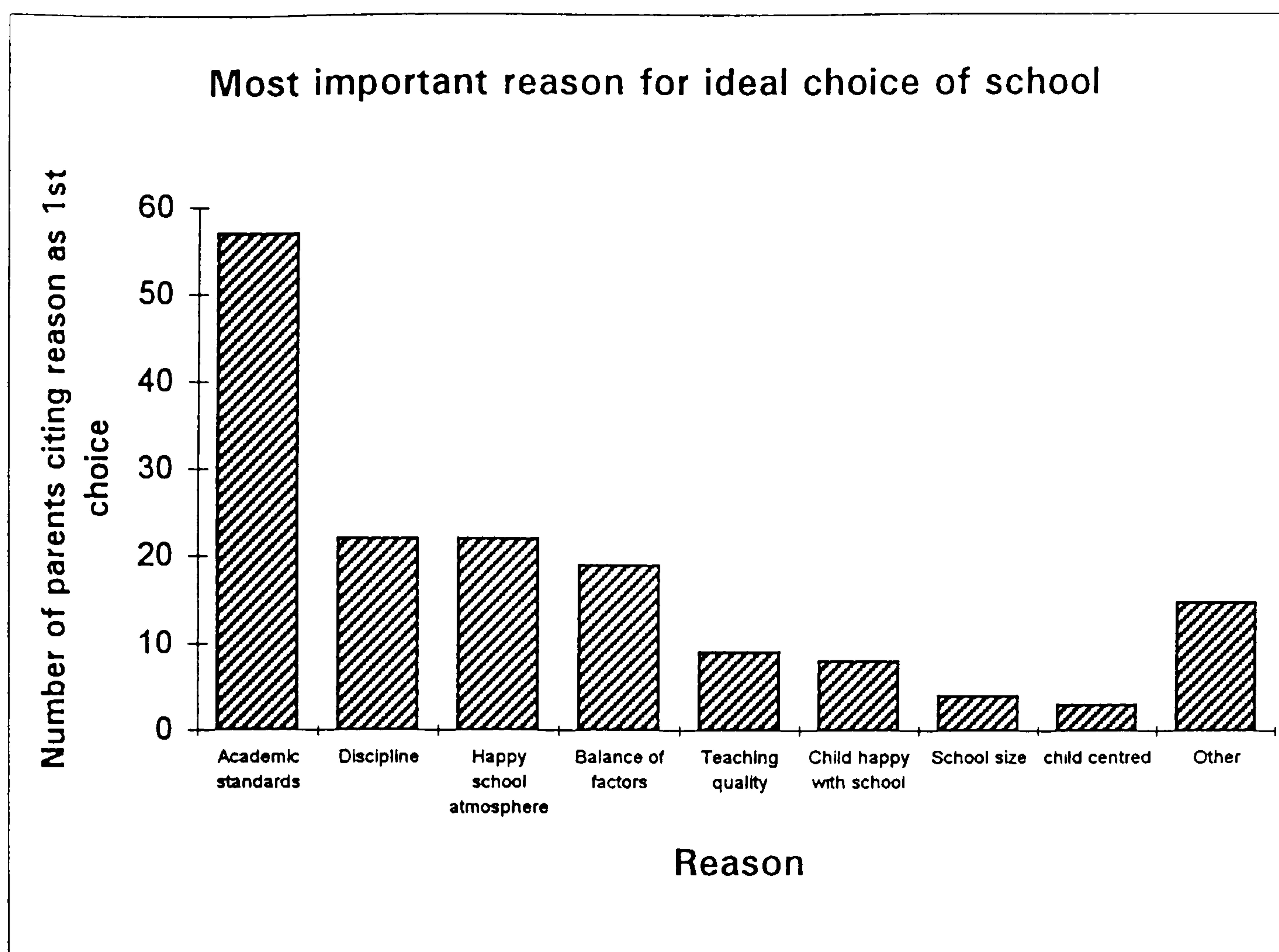


Figure 8.2.3 Most important reason for ideal choice of school

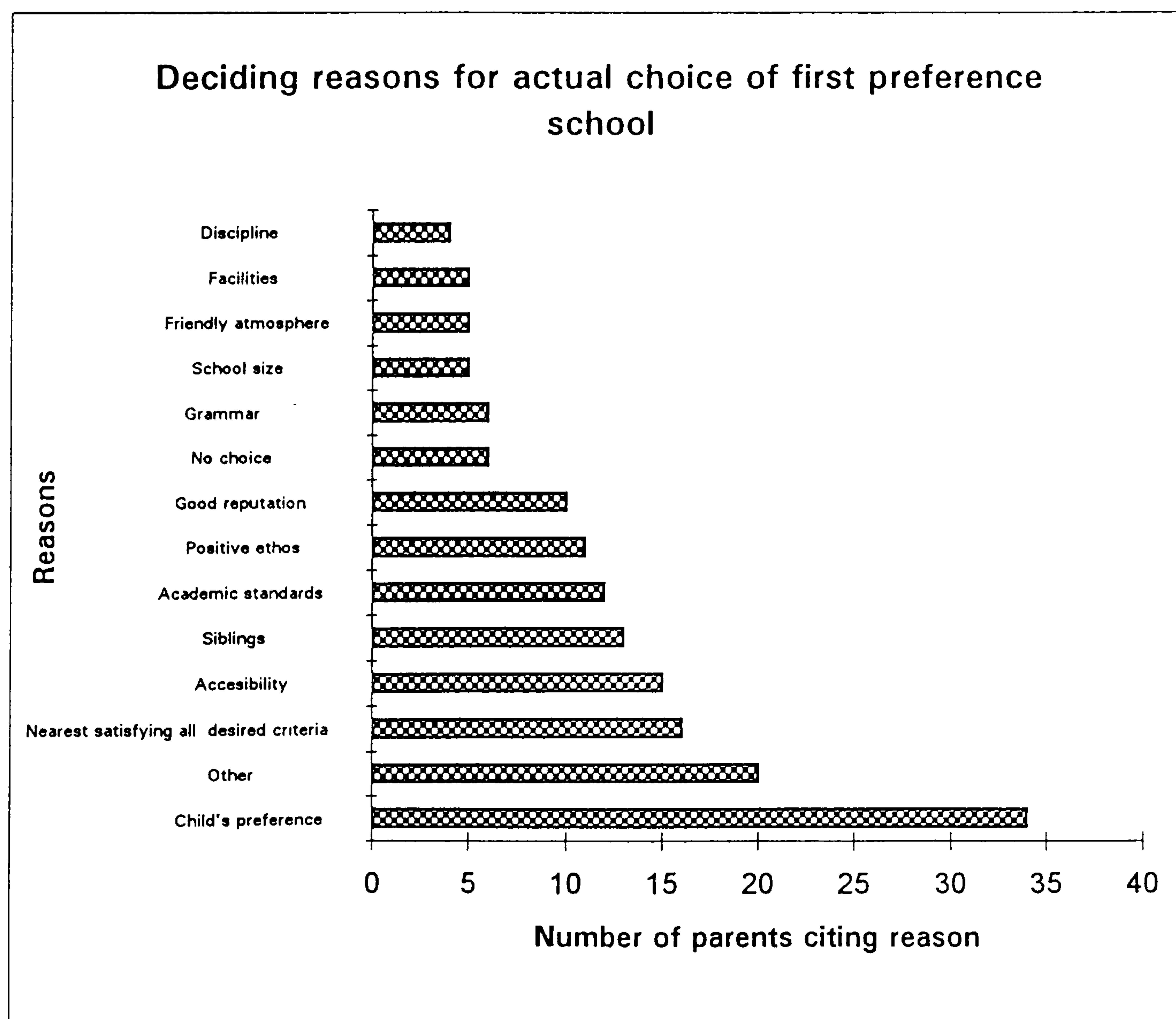


Figure 8.2.4 Deciding reasons for actual choice of first preference school

objected to their children attending grammar or comprehensive schools (*). Intriguingly, all the parents opposed to grammar school were in occupational classes I, II and IIIA - this may reflect the perceived quality of their local comprehensive schools. Parents in more deprived areas were much more likely to see grammar schools as a possible alternative to an unattractive local school.

Finally, parents were asked to identify the final deciding factor that tipped the balance towards their first choice. Often parents were choosing between schools that were similar in respect of many attributes such as size, academic standards and social composition of intake. Indeed, for suburban parents, in particular, the hopes of parental choice advocates such as Hargreaves (1997) that the policy would lead to substantial diversification of school type have not been fulfilled. The key deciding factors were often, then, quite different from the 'ideal' factors in choice considered above (see Figure 8.2.4). The commonest reason was the child's own preference. This would commonly result in the choice of the local comprehensive because that was the destination of their friends. Finally, for the 23% of parents for whom geographical criteria (mainly accessibility) were most influential, there was clearly a strong likelihood of the local school being chosen, if it was considered satisfactory (**).

There were no clear patterns of socio-economic variation in the key deciding factor. For example, a similar percentage of parents in occupational classes IV and V cited academic criteria as in classes I and II. There were much greater differences between parents in the different locations with 62% of rural parents citing a geographical deciding factor compared with 16% in Old and New Northwick (**). Nearly all of the parents who said their final choice was decided on academic grounds were in Old Northwick (18 out of 111 parents) reflecting the greater variation in academic standards there.

On the whole, the great majority of parents were concerned that their child should be happy at their new school and wanted to be sure that it was a 'safe' environment. However, over a third considered academic criteria the most important factor in choice. Contrary to expectations, there was much more spatial variation in the importance attributed to academic (and other) criteria as an input to choice - it would seem that parents tend to value those factors in choice over which they have control, whatever their socio-economic status.

8.2.5 Extent of choice.

Many commentators (e.g. Adler *et al*, 1989) have remarked upon the lack of choice available to rural parents, but there has been little research into the real extent of choice available to parents. This cannot be measured by counting schools within a child's 'reasonable travelling distance'. Not all schools that are accessible may be suitable, and over-subscription criteria can render suitable schools unobtainable. This part of the interview was designed to elucidate the real extent of choice perceived by parents to be available to them and to identify any social or spatial variation therein.

Parents were asked how many schools they found acceptable for their child, a school being 'acceptable' if it was reasonably accessible and the parents would be happy for their child to attend it. Most parents (74%) identified at least three or more schools that were acceptable by this definition for their children, with only 8% who felt they only had one realistic choice (**) (and these were mostly rural). A significant number of parents had a wide choice, with 12% able to consider 6 or more schools. Predictably, there is considerable spatial variation in the extent of choice. The mean number of schools perceived as available for rural parents is 2.5, for New Northwick 3.5 and for Old Northwick it is 4.4 (**). Furthermore, over 35% of rural parents felt that they had only one school from which to choose, compared with 8% of parents in New Northwick and 2% in Old Northwick (**). By contrast, 41% of Old

Northwick parents considered they had 5 or more acceptable schools from which to choose compared with 28% in New Northwick and 8% in rural catchments (**).

It might be expected that the middle-classes would be advantaged with regard to their perceived extent of choice of secondary schools. There is no strong evidence for this. Although a much smaller proportion of the unemployed (18%) perceived 5 or more schools to be available, compared to the other occupational groups (33% - 39%), the difference is not statistically significant (though a larger sample might well make it so). If any comparative disadvantage for the unemployed could be demonstrated, it might be particularly important with respect to Old Northwick, where many of the unemployed live, and where the perceived extent of choice tends to be greatest for the average parent. Indeed, when pupils' home postcodes are allocated to Townsend deprivation index quartiles, it is the parents living in the most deprived neighbourhoods that are most likely to have 3 or more schools available (**). However, this breadth of choice often failed to translate into a satisfactory choice between schools of good quality. Grammar and denominational schools to which the child might have no realistic chance of entry were often numbered amongst the accessible schools. Also, in Old Northwick, the schools that were accessible and popular were also likely to be over-subscribed, so that the actual choice might be between schools of perceived low quality, particularly for aspiring working-class and middle-class parents.

Most parents limited their decision-making process to a sub-set of available schools. Some 'acceptable' schools might be over-subscribed or have selection criteria that were unlikely to be satisfied by their child. There was no attempt to quantify the extent of this 'real' choice available to parents. This was partly to limit the complexity of this stage of the interview and partly because of the difficulty of objectively assessing the child's chances in

the 11-plus or identifying how over-subscription criteria in other schools would operate in hypothetical instances. Instead, parents were asked which of the 'acceptable' schools they seriously considered for their child, measuring, to a certain degree, quality as opposed to quantity of choice.

The geographical variation in the extent of 'serious' choice proved similar to that for the number of 'acceptable' schools. About 35% of Old and New Northwick parents seriously consider just one school with the majority of them only thinking about the local school. Unsurprisingly, only about a quarter of rural parents seriously consider more than one school. Old Northwick parents are much more likely to consider seriously more than three schools (66%) than parents in New Northwick and rural locations (both 15%) (**).

There is little obvious social variation, amongst parents, in the number of schools seriously considered (n.s.). That similar proportions of high and low status parents should consider only one school may be considered surprising in view of the perceptions of other researchers (e.g. Gewirtz *et al*, 1995), that middle-class parents are making more effective use of parental choice. A possible explanation is that while, all things being equal, lower status groups are more strongly motivated to accept the local school, higher status groups are more likely to live in the catchment of a desirable comprehensive and not need to make an active choice. Indeed, their choice may have been implicitly expressed when they bought their house if their purchase was strongly influenced by the school catchment within which the property was located. This issue is discussed further in section 8.3.3.

Overall, geography appears much more important than class as a factor in the extent of choice available to parents. However, the social status of parents in the less-affluent catchments was likely to influence the likelihood of parents seriously considering a greater

number of schools.

8.2.6 Acceptability of choice.

Whether the choice is wide or narrow, it is obviously important to parents that they have access to at least one school with which they are happy. Parents were asked to what extent they agreed that their first preference school was excellent.

Only three parents disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement that their preferred school was either excellent, and in all these cases their child's views had been given primacy. Of course, parents having committed themselves to their choice are unlikely to assess it as unsuitable, and the most revealing comparison is between parents who 'agree' and those who 'strongly agree' on the excellence of their choice. The most notable variation is between urban and rural parents with only 12% of the latter *strongly* agreeing that their preferred school is excellent compared with 58% of urban parents (**). Two explanations for this difference suggest themselves. First, when parents have a choice they are likely to feel more committed to their expressed preference. Second, rural parents may genuinely be less impressed with their local school. Given that the rural comprehensive schools' GCSE performance is comparable to that of those in New Northwick with a similar social mix, then the former would seem more probable.

The LEA judges the success of their secondary transfer procedures by the number of parents who are able to secure their first choice, with consistent levels above 90% by this criterion. However, the interviews revealed that almost 20% of parents would actually choose another school if their child was guaranteed a place at that school. About half of these were parents who would have preferred grammar school places for their children but perceived the consequences of 11-plus failure as a place at an unsatisfactory comprehensive

school. Spatial and social variation in failure to achieve first preference is noticeably absent.

It became clear in many interviews that, for some parents, the whole process could be extremely painful. Although 68% of parents found their choice easy or quite easy, 12% of urban parents and 4% of rural parents found the choice process very difficult (**). This partly reflects parental approaches to choice: the difference between 'optimisers' and 'satisficers'. The statistics also reflect the actual extent and quality of the choices available. However, almost without exception, parents took the whole transfer process extremely seriously, feeling a great responsibility to their children, even if the amount of choice was very limited.

When parents were asked their opinion of the Eastland transfer system as a whole, they were certainly not wholehearted in its support. Many parents feel that the system does not provide real, effective choice - with over 25% believing it works badly. Many felt that the LEA operated the system fairly but that the parental choice system itself, as legislated, was unfair in the way that a parents could express a preference but had no right to choose a school - contrary to their original impression. Forty-one parents, over a quarter of the sample, specifically mentioned their unhappiness about the inability of their child to take the 11-plus examination without risking their place at the local comprehensive school.

On the whole, parents appear reasonably satisfied with their choices, though how much rationalisation is involved is impossible to determine. Nevertheless, about a fifth of parents felt unable even to give their real preference to the LEA in the first round of choice, the majority of whom wanted a grammar school place but feared the consequences of 11-plus failure. Even disregarding these parents whose hope for a grammar school place for their child might well have been thwarted by 11-plus failure, 10 out the 163 parents in the sample did not express a preference for a comprehensive school because they judged that over-

subscription criteria might deny them a place. As school rolls increase and popular schools fill up more quickly, there is likely to be a rise in parental dissatisfaction. They will be increasingly aware of the gap between the government's apparent promise of the right to choose a secondary school and the reality of the right to express a preference that may not be satisfied.

8.2.7 Transport and school choice.

Before proceeding, two potentially important factors in choice, transport and siblings, are briefly considered. The importance of transport as a factor in school choice was clear in this survey. Transport can play a major role in providing alternatives for parents unhappy with the local catchment comprehensive and in shaping *de facto* catchments. The children from ONC9's catchment who travelled over six and a half miles to take places at NNC4 were all using a cross-city bus-service without which the journey would probably have been too long for many.

The large-scale outflow of pupils from the middle-class neighbourhoods in ONC2's catchment was noted in the GIS analysis. The survey revealed that a number of middle-class parents who live in ONC2's catchment were unhappy with the bad reputation of this comprehensive, but there was no convenient bus service to a suitable under-subscribed alternative. Their solution was to hire their own bus to transport children to the rural RC1. Such bus services may become increasingly common if competition for places in popular schools grows. Finally, many parents in ONC6's catchment were uneasy about the busy traffic and undesirable nature of the route to the school. The frequent bus services to New Northwick were not only perceived as a 'safer' journey than that to the local school, but for a number of children, the journey time was actually shorter. Of course, not all parents can afford the expense of these fares.

The importance of bus services was further underlined by the analysis of the type of transport parents expected their children to use to get to their new school (Table 8.2.1). About two thirds of children attending the local catchment comprehensive school travel by foot or bicycle with most of the remainder travelling by bus. Less than a quarter of children attending out-of-catchment comprehensive, denominational and grammar schools walk or cycle to school. Clearly, increased choice of out-of-catchment school is likely to lead to a greater volume of traffic at a time of day when congestion is already very high. However, most children appear to use buses, rather than cars, for long journeys so that the environmental impact of children travelling further to school may be minimised if convenient bus services, public or private, continue to be maintained. Three quarters of the pupils attending denominational schools arrive by bus, for which there is no charge for those living over three miles from the school. This statistic emphasises the ability of subsidised public transport to support extensive *de facto* catchments and increase the choice available to the poorest parents.

School type - % using transport method, (n)				
Transport method	Local comp	Other comp	Grammar	Denominational
Foot/push-bike	64 (44)	21 (9)	23 (7)	19 (3)
Car	6 (4)	16 (7)	23 (7)	6 (1)
Bus	30 (21)	63 (27)	53 (16)	75 (12)

Table 8.2.1 - Transport use according to type of school attended

8.2.8 Siblings and school choice.

For about half of the parents in the sample, the choice process is less difficult because they have been through it before with an older child. Not only are they familiar with the transfer procedures but they generally prefer their child to attend the same school as their sibling. Presence of a sibling is, except for grammar schools, one of the filters in the event of over-subscription, and can therefore give parents a competitive advantage.

The varying influence of the school choice of elder siblings is shown in Table 8.2.2. Very few parents choose an alternative for their child if another sibling has attended the local comprehensive. When an out-of-catchment school is chosen, however, previous decisions appear much less important. Selection of a school that elder siblings did not attend is much more characteristic of Old Northwick parents (22%) than of parents in New Northwick and rural catchments (both 4%) (*). This reflects both the greater dissatisfaction with local schools in Old Northwick and the diversity of choice available to these parents. The higher value placed by working-class parents on maintaining links between their child and siblings and friends was discussed previously in this chapter. Those who hold these values were much more likely to choose the local comprehensive. However, another section of working-class parents has indeed adopted more middle-class attitudes when making their school choice, putting a higher priority on their child's individual needs than on traditional community or neighbourhood links. This is exemplified by the fact that for approximately half of parents in occupational groups IV and V the first choice school is different to that to which the majority of their friends will be attending.

School type - % by category, (n)				
School choice of elder siblings	Local comp	Other comp	Grammar	Denominational
Elder sibling(s) now or previously at same secondary school	51 (36)	39 (17)	10 (3)	25 (4)
No elder sibling(s) now or previously at same secondary school	4 (3)	16 (7)	30 (9)	31 (5)
No sibling	45 (32)	46 (20)	60 (18)	44 (7)

Table 8.2.2 - Influence of previous sibling choice on current choice

8.2.9 Summary.

Even the rural interviewees, with no real choice available, took their role as education consumers very seriously. However, the way that parents undertook and viewed the choice

process varied considerably. The survey confirmed the utility of Bowe *et al*'s (1995) concept of a parent's 'landscape of choice' that may vary from the very sketchy to highly nuanced, sophisticated views of an extensive educational landscape. The quality of parent's appreciation of the educational market place was, however, much more dependent on the extent and quality of choice available to them than their socio-economic status. Though, middle-class parents tended to be more knowledgeable, in this regard, than parents of lower social status living in the same area, many other contextual influences were important in the choice process. These included: location, perceived academic and social quality of the local comprehensive, the extent to which a child is likely to be 'at home' in a particular school, individual preferences regarding selective education and a history of children in a neighbourhood attending particular schools.

'Satisficers' who sought the most convenient school satisfying their basic choice criteria (most commonly the child's happiness, discipline and academic standards) were much more common than 'optimisers' who would compare prospectuses and attend large numbers of open days/evenings in order to find the *best* school for their child.

Apart from rural parents, there is a reasonably high degree of choice available, though most parents consider only one or two schools seriously. However, the increasing realisation of their ability to make out-of-catchment choices, together with the likelihood of rising rolls increasingly limiting the number of places available in popular schools, may intensify the substantial unhappiness with the choice system articulated by a quarter of parents.

8.3 Parents choosing the local comprehensive.

8.3.1 Introduction.

This section examines the decision-making processes of parents who choose their local catchment comprehensive school. Again, the first sub-section analyses socio-spatial

variation in parents' choice of school, as well as attempting to identify differences between those parents who choose this option and the rest of the population. In the second sub-section, besides analysis of parents' views and their behaviour, different categorical variables are used to identify the extent to which those parents choosing the local option have any characteristics in common. In any sub-section where particular characteristics are not mentioned, then it may be assumed that there is no significant variation from the general pattern. Subsequent sections provide a similar analysis of parents choosing out-of-catchment comprehensives, grammar and denominational schools.

8.3.2 The choice process.

For most parents who choose the local catchment comprehensive, the decision is relatively easy to make. They are likely to be happy that the local school is suitable for their child, it is convenient, their friends approve of it and their child's friends will mostly be attending it. There are, of course, exceptions, for example, rural parents who have no choice, parents who would prefer a grammar school place but are not confident about their child's ability, and parents who give sway to their child's wishes against their better judgement. On the whole, though, choice is much simpler for parents who prefer the local comprehensive.

They attend less open days/evenings (a mean of 1.2 compared with 1.7 for all parents in the sample (**)). They have a narrower choice (a mean of 3.3 acceptable schools compared with 4.2 for those choosing an out-of-catchment comprehensive (**)). Only 21% of parents choosing the local catchment school consider that there are five or more acceptable schools compared with 34% for other parents (**). There is an even more striking difference, though, in the actual choice procedure, with 61% seriously considering just one school compared with a figure of 30% for those choosing an alternative comprehensive - the means are 1.5 and 1.8 respectively (**). In all locations for all classes, if the local school was

acceptable and the child was happy to go there, any examination of alternatives tended to be fairly cursory. The main exception was New Northwick where parents could select from a pair of easily accessible schools with similar intakes and academic standards. These parents were often faced with a difficult choice as far as differentiating between the qualities of the competing schools was concerned, but an easy choice in that either of the schools was perfectly acceptable for their child. In these circumstances, they could fully participate in the choice process with little to lose and, being mostly middle-class, were better able to negotiate the subtleties of choice involved in discriminating between such apparently similar institutions.

The easy availability of advice from friends and elder siblings about the qualities of the local school tends to make them much more useful to parents as aids to decision-making than open days/evenings. The latter are much more commonly used as a confirmation of choice rather than a contribution towards it. Friends are the most important information source for 37% of these parents compared with 21% of those choosing out-of-catchment comprehensives (*). Many parents stress the importance of their child going to the same school as friends. For those choosing the local catchment school, 89% will be going to the same school as their friends, while for children choosing an alternate comprehensive the figure is only 30% (**).

The importance of perceptions of local schoolchildren has already been mentioned. Bad behaviour, bullying or scruffiness may cause some parents to look elsewhere. The parents must be happy that their child will be comfortable in the school's social environment. The community grapevine is often vital - a couple of unsavoury incidents and it may turn against a school whose reputation may take years to recover.

As would be expected, a relatively high proportion of parents choosing the local catchment

comprehensive (39%) considers convenience a very important reason in an ideal choice of school. Thirty five percent of them give geographical factors as the final deciding reason in reaching their preference - twice as many as for those selecting an alternative comprehensive (**). These parents also tend to give much more child-centred reasons for final choice than those selecting grammar or denominational schools. Sometimes this even extends to allowing a child to go to the local school when the parents disapprove of it. Factors that are less important for parents choosing the local comprehensive are discipline and high academic standards - the majority of parents see these as very important but not to the same degree as in other schools. Only 19% see school size as very important - similar to those choosing out-of-catchment comprehensives but low compared with the 50% of parents choosing selective and denominational schools who rate school size this important (*). Again, there may be an element of rationalisation of choice here, as well as an expression of genuine differences in preferences about schools.

Parents choosing the local school are less likely to 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that it is excellent (80% compared with 90% or more for other school types) (**), though this at least partly reflects the lack of choice faced by rural parents. However, they are more likely to think that the system works well as a whole (67% compared with just 48% for those choosing an alternative comprehensive (*)) - presumably reflecting the fact that they inevitably secure their first preference.

For 21% of parents choosing the local catchment comprehensive, another school would have been preferable if they could have been confident of securing a place for their child. Parents choosing alternative comprehensives were even more likely to prefer another school than their specified first preference, parents preferring grammar and denominational schools rather less so (**).

8.3.3 Characteristics of parents.

The survey confirms the findings of the GIS analysis that there is little variation in the social status of parents in the overall extent to which they choose the local comprehensive school. However, the middle-class may still be making more effective use of choice as many of them live in the catchments of attractive schools and have no need to look beyond the catchment boundary. For example, in Old Northwick only about 11% of parents in occupational classes I and II in the survey chose the local comprehensive, whereas in New Northwick the figure was 86% and in rural areas 100% (**). Low social status parents are more likely than middle-class parents to choose to remain in Old Northwick catchments(*). The fact that similar numbers of working- and middle-class parents choose out-of-catchment schools reflects the greater abundance of the former group in the catchments of unpopular schools.

Perhaps surprisingly, the parents' education seems to have little relationship with the likelihood, or not, of choosing a local comprehensive. It is only when parents look for an alternative that previous education appears to be a factor in choice. This further supports the view that there is a certain amount of resistance to making any other choice than the local school - if this is considered satisfactory then the parents' previous educational experience is irrelevant.

It was stated earlier that middle-class parents have less need for alternatives to the local school. One reason for this is their pre-emptive use of choice through purchase of a house in a favoured catchment. Twenty seven percent of parents in the survey said catchment location was very or quite important in deciding where to live. With such a low number of parents (30) in this sub-group, only very strong relationships are likely to be statistically significant, and none were identified here. However, bearing this in mind, it is worth noting

that the survey found that the highest percentage of parents, who said that house location was influenced by school catchments, were in occupational classes IIIa and IIIb. If a larger sample were to confirm the importance of this association, the appropriate interpretation could relate closely to the behaviour of classes I and II. Their prosperity meant that any house purchased is so likely to be located in one of the more desired catchments that the presence of 'a good local school' is taken for granted. The most desirable locations for house purchase, as far as school choice is concerned, were identified as ONC4, New Northwick and the rural catchments.

Before this survey, car availability was hypothesised as a potential factor forcing choice of the local school. However the survey found no relationship between choice of school and car-ownership. Indeed, it was shown in Section 8.2.7 that cars are far from the commonest means of transport either locally or outside the catchment.

8.3.4 Summary.

Parents choosing the local catchment do so for a variety of reasons, but they tend to make their choices on the basis of pre-existing local knowledge backed up by friends and children. Perhaps the clearest difference between the local and alternative schools is the likelihood that a child's friends will also go there. Perhaps this is why parents choosing this option tend to talk more about child-centred 'process' factors than 'product' factors such as academic achievement. Convenience, while seldom given the highest importance in factors in choosing a school, is often a deciding factor. In other words, alternative schools may have to offer considerable added value if parents are to reject the local option. The next sections consider those parents, from all social strata, for whom this is indeed the case.

8.4 Parents choosing an out-of-catchment comprehensive.

8.4.1 The selection process.

As stated in the previous section, parents choosing out-of-catchment comprehensive schools attend more open days/evenings than those choosing the local school. They are much more likely to consider seriously more than one school than are non-movers. However, only about 10% of either group seriously considered more than 2 schools. As with many parents choosing an out-of-catchment school when one of those seriously considered is the local school, it is clear that the choice process is not very extensive. If the existing school is not considered suitable, then the nearest accessible and suitable alternative is sought. Often, parents in a particular area, or social group, have a standard alternative available to them. In ONC2 it is RC1. In New Northwick it is the alternative comprehensive in each suburb. Thus, the mean number of schools seriously considered is not very different for this group (1.8 compared with 1.5 for those choosing the local school (**)).

Parents choosing an out-of-catchment comprehensive were clearly, in general, less influenced by their child's views. Parents would canvass friends and family for opinions on alternatives and though parents would often have a clear view of their preference beforehand, the open day/evening tended to be much more important as a contribution towards their final choice (59% rated it the most important information source (*)).

Although friends were still the first or second most important source of information for 62% of parents, only 30% of children whose parents chose an out-of-catchment comprehensive were going to the same school as most of their friends. Sometimes, particularly in more deprived areas, this was deliberate, with parents either wanting to get their children away from bad influences or bullies. At other times, motives were more positive, with parents choosing schools that they thought more suited to their child's needs,

often considered in very subtle ways. It was very rare that a child would go to a new school unaccompanied by any existing friends.

Most parents who rejected the local comprehensive for another elsewhere fitted a model of concentration on the child's overall needs, rather than desires. They researched for a school that suited the child better than the local option, then confirmed the choice at an open day/evening. This is reflected in the high number of these parents whose final deciding criterion is 'child-centred' (focused on the happiness of the child) - at 56%, much higher than for any other school type (**).

This group of parents' view of the most important reason in choosing an ideal school did not vary greatly from the parents choosing other school types. Many in this group of parents occupy a middle ground, between those choosing the local option and those applying to selective schools, concerned as they are about academic standards, though not to the almost over-riding extent that characterises grammar school applicants. For many parents, choice of an alternative comprehensive was rooted in a decisive rejection of the local school because of its low academic standards. Another group is making a negative choice based on concerns about discipline and safety. Parents tend to prefer 'safe' suburban schools to mixed inner-city sites where bullying and drugs are seen as potential problems. For those parents in Old Northwick catchments choosing New Northwick comprehensives, both academic standards and the perceived degree of safety are seen as substantially superior in the out-of-catchment schools. Thus, the two factors may be very much intertwined in the choice that parents make.

The GIS analysis identified an interesting contrast in the ability of ONC2 and ONC4 to attract pupils from their own catchment. The catchments of the two schools contained the largest amount of middle-class housing in Old Northwick, though in both cases the affluent

neighbourhoods were balanced by more deprived areas. ONC2's ability to attract the majority of middle-class children from its catchment is based on the long-standing good reputation of the school which is such that several parents said that its location within ONC2's catchment was a major contributory factor in their house purchase. Parents knew that the school would be over-subscribed and were therefore loath to risk the loss of a place there when none of the neighbouring comprehensive schools were perceived as suitable alternatives. ONC2, on the other hand, had never developed the good reputation of ONC4 and middle-class parents were almost unanimous in their negative view of the school. The strength of the 'community grapevine' amongst the middle-class communities in ONC2's catchment is a major obstacle to that school ever succeeding in attracting an intake that reflects the characteristics of the catchment population. These parents had nothing to lose from making another school their first preference, as ONC2 would never be over-subscribed.

Parents choosing out-of-catchment schools tend to have a wider range of schools available - only 21% have less than three acceptable schools compared with 39% of non-movers (**). These statistics reflect the higher rate of catchment permeability in Old Northwick where the greatest choice, in simple numeric terms, is available.

This group of parents tends to be happier with their professed choice, 91% considering it excellent, at least 10% more than non-movers (**). However, they are more likely to think badly of the system as a whole - 36% compared with 14% for non-movers (*). This reflects the fact that over 34% of parents choosing an out-of-catchment comprehensive would have ideally chosen another school, given a completely free choice. Some of these parents were very bitter about the absence of genuine free choice. Many are passionate about their inability to commit their child to the 11-plus examination without risking the loss of a place

in a preferred comprehensive school in the event of failure.

8.4.2 Characterisation of parents choosing out-of-catchment schools.

Apart from the greater proportion of unemployed (18% compared with 10% for those choosing the local comprehensive (*)) there was no obvious social differentiation of parents choosing out-of-catchment schools compared with the general population. However, parents of occupational class I and II living in Old Northwick were much more likely to choose an out-of-catchment comprehensive (generally in New Northwick) than other classes of parent or similar parents in New Northwick and rural catchments (*). There were no clear relationships between parents' own education and choice of this category of school.

8.5 Parents seeking a grammar school.

8.5.1 Choice process.

Parents seeking grammar school places are the most active seekers of choice. They attend most open days/evenings, with 73% attending more than one open day/evening and 40% attending three or more (*). Generally, parents cast their nets so wide not because they are unsure about whether they want a grammar place, but because they must be careful about the consequences of failure. They need to be aware of the alternatives when they do not know which schools will be over-subscribed should their child fail the 11-plus examination.

This group of parents also has the highest number of acceptable schools available to it, with a mean of 5.1 compared with 4.2 available to parents choosing out-of-catchment comprehensives and denominational schools (**). This only partly reflects the location of the parents. Those seeking a place at a denominational school, for instance, are even more concentrated in Old Northwick. It seems that the inevitable uncertainty about the outcome of the 11-plus examination and the consequent need to consider a range of alternatives

widens these parents' 'landscape of choice' compared with those with more straightforward decision-making strategies. Failure in the 11-plus, and over-subscription of popular local schools, may necessitate a wide-ranging search for a second preference, requiring a knowledge of which schools are likely to be available and their respective qualities. Thus, these parents are most likely to have a holistic view of the map of choice available within the secondary school system. This is confirmed by the 50% of parents of grammar school applicants who seriously consider three or more schools (**).

Parents choosing grammar schools are much less reliant on the opinions of parents' friends and the community grapevine as sources of information about the schools' quality. Only 27% of parents cite friends as the first or second most important information source, compared with approximately 60% of the parents who choose other school types (**). They are more likely to use league tables and the media (**) for information. This is, perhaps, unsurprising as the grammar schools perform far better in these tables than any other school, so that parents relying on league tables will inevitably favour the selective schools. Information from the child's primary school was an important contribution towards choice for some parents. A supportive attitude towards children interested in a grammar school place was, however, the experience of a minority of parents. Many reported that primary school teachers made clear their lack of sympathy towards selective education and did little to help preparation for the 11-plus examination.

The academic focus of these parents' choice processes is clear, with 87% of parents entering their child for the 11-plus examination considering high academic standards to be a very important factor in choice of school. Indeed, for 57% of these parents, academic criteria were the 'tipping' factor when they made their final choice of school with a corresponding figure of less than 5% for any other school types (**). Despite the fact that

grammar school children travel the longest distances, only 17% of parents consider convenience unimportant; parents choosing out-of-catchment comprehensives and denominational schools are twice as likely to share this view (**). Finally, 40% of these parents prefer single-sex schools, though most parents did not hold very strong views on the topic (**). Given the choice between an academically strong mixed school and an academically average single-sex school, the great majority would choose the former.

Parents seeking grammar school places for their child, almost without exception, have a high opinion of their first choice school. None of them would have preferred another school to their expressed preference. They have similar views about the fairness and effectiveness of the Eastland secondary transfer system to those seeking out-of-catchment and denominational school places with about 34% believing it unsatisfactory. This dissatisfaction would be liable to intensify as the rising pupil population further restricts availability of places at 'attractive' comprehensives for 11-plus failures.

8.5.2 Characterisation of parents seeking grammar schools.

The parents of children taking the 11-plus examination include an over-representation of occupational class IIIa (**) and an under-representation of classes I and II (**). Again, this reflects the advantage enjoyed by most children with higher-status parents who tend to live in higher-status areas with higher-status comprehensive schools. There is no perceptible relationship between the mother's own education and choice of grammar school. However, 41% of the fathers of children who take the 11-plus examination have had a grammar school education themselves (population mean 23.4%) with a corresponding under-representation of fathers with a secondary modern education (*).

8.6 Parents seeking a denominational school.

8.6.1 Choice process.

There are two main types of parents seeking places at denominational school for their children. First are Catholics whose child attends a denominational primary school linked to a denominational secondary school. For these families there is a fair degree of certainty about the outcome because of their child's satisfaction of the denominational school's selection criteria, and the parents' strong views about what is the right type of school for their child. In these cases there is only one school seriously considered. A smaller group do not share the religion of the preferred school but are unhappy with the local catchment school and find the smaller-scale, disciplined, child-centred approach of the denominational schools to their taste. In this respect, denominational schools provide an alternative to grammar schools as a way of avoiding the local comprehensive when alternative, accessible comprehensives are not considered to be suitable. Thus, even though 75% of the 16 parents interviewed have 3 or more acceptable schools available, 56% of parents attend only 0 or 1 open days/evenings and 44% seriously consider just one school (*).

Primary schools were found to be a much more important part of the selection process for this group of parents (being the most or second most important information source for 38% of parents (*)). This is unsurprising, as many of these children have been attending denominational primary schools that are feeders to the denominational secondary schools. In contrast with the importance that these parents place on the child-centred approach of these schools, the child's own opinion appears less important as a contribution to the final decision. Choice of this type of school was most characterised by parents who considered what was good for their child rather than what the child wanted. There was no major variation from the norm in the importance of the other information sources to these parents.

They are most interested in child-centred reasons for choice, believing that denominational schools will get the best out of a child, whether or not it is academic, in a disciplined environment. They are, apparently, least governed by convenience (only 6% believe this to be very important compared with 27% of all parents(*)). Academic standards are rated as highly as by parents seeking out-of-catchment comprehensives, but less than by those choosing grammar schools (*). Single-sex education is preferred by 63% (**) of these parents and they consider the small size of these schools to be very important - easily the greatest proportion for any one school type (**). When it comes to the final 'tipping' factor, there was a wide variety of reasons, with no parents citing academic factors, and only 3 of the 16 parents saying that it was the school's denominational character that tipped the balance for them. The majority of the other parents gave 'child-centred' reasons, either highlighting the school's ability to see their child as an individual or perceiving the school as somewhere their child would 'fit in' well.

Every one of those parents seeking denominational school places for their children considered their preferred school to be excellent and only one parent favoured another school. Thirty eight percent of parents consider the Eastland secondary transfer system to work quite or very badly. Most of this dissatisfaction reflected a belief that the secondary transfer system failed to provide real choice because the over-subscription criteria prevented parents from securing a place at a preferred comprehensive, or left children without a place at a popular local comprehensive if they failed the 11-plus.

8.6.2 Characterisation of parents seeking denominational schools.

Analysis of interview data was unable to demonstrate that parents applying for places at denominational schools are characterised by over-representation of parents in occupational classes IIIb, IV and V and under-representation of classes I and II. However, biases of this

type were established by the GIS analysis, which demonstrated that children attending denominational schools predominantly came from less affluent neighbourhoods (see Table 6.6.2). This provides some support for the suggestion that these denominational schools have found a niche as 'working-class grammar schools'. Fathers and mothers who attended comprehensive school are under-represented in this group, whilst mothers who attended grammar school are over-represented. Surprisingly, only four parents of either gender had attended a denominational school themselves. This confirmed the impression that parents choosing these schools were making a very considered choice, rather than automatically sending their child to the same school as their friends and/or neighbours.

8.7 Summary.

Sins of generalisation are inevitable in any chapter summary. This is especially so in this case, where the diversity of values and opinions expressed by parents in relation to school choice was truly striking. It is fair to say that if the local catchment school was reasonably acceptable to child, parents and friends, and most local children of similar social status attended it, then it was highly likely that the school would be chosen as first preference. However, when the local school was considered unsatisfactory for any reason, then it was not possible to predict with confidence which alternative a particular parent of a particular social status in a particular location would choose.

Nevertheless, certain patterns of choice, in terms of approach and outcome, were identifiable, which were related to both the social and spatial contexts of choice. Parents choosing the local comprehensive in relatively deprived catchments of Old Northwick were more likely to be of lower social status, concerned that their children attend the same school as their friends, and less worried about absolute academic standards. In New Northwick parents of all classes were generally happy with the local comprehensive, which was

academically successful by virtue, in part at least, of the characteristics of the catchment population. In rural catchments any dissatisfaction tended to be focused on their lack of choice rather than the schools themselves.

Parents chose out-of-catchment comprehensive schools for a variety of reasons. For some the out-of-catchment school was chosen because of factors such as easier accessibility and the presence of siblings or friends. For another group of parents, 'safety' and academic criteria applied. This was a major source of movement between the relatively deprived Old Northwick catchments and the New Northwick comprehensives. Finally, some parents chose alternative comprehensives for a very specific reason relating to their child such as a preference for a small school, curricular strength or avoidance of a known bully.

Parents choosing grammar schools predominantly cited academic factors as paramount in making their choice. This often reflected a fundamental rejection of the local catchment comprehensive because of academic standards perceived as well below what these parents consider acceptable. The potential consequences of 11-plus failure necessitated a wide search strategy because of the uncertainty about the availability of a suitable fall-back choice. Those choosing denominational schools did so very deliberately. The discipline and social values associated with a denominational school were plainly important to these parents, but often less so than the perceived stress laid by denominational schools on the development of the 'whole child' without undue concentration on the academic aspects of the curriculum.

Finally, parents confirmed the importance of transport and geography in choice. For some parents inappropriately drawn catchment boundaries meant that they could not attend the most accessible comprehensive, though these cases were rare. For others, the availability of bus services brought distant schools into the centre of their 'landscape of choice'. Many

saw themselves choosing between schools of similar standard and therefore chose the local option on grounds of convenience, cost, and the child's links with the local community.

Geography is clearly still important to many parents when they choose a secondary school. The following chapter will consider the results of this survey in the context of the GIS analysis and the concerns of this thesis discussed in preceding chapters.

Chapter Nine - Summary and conclusions.

9.1 Introduction.

This study has two main aims. The first aim, the evaluation of the extent to which secondary school catchments have become more permeable in recent years, was readily achieved through the GIS analysis. The second aim, the characterisation of the factors that make a catchment more or less permeable was considerably more problematic. The complexity arose from the many ways that the pre-existing structure of inter-catchment flows interacted with the highly varied socio-spatial contexts within which individual parents make their decisions. However, by integrating the results of the GIS analysis, social survey and other inputs to the study, a number of socio-spatial patterns and trends in choice of out-of-catchment secondary school were identified. This chapter summarises these findings, considers the overall outcome of the choice process for parents, schools, LEAs and society as a whole. It also speculates on the future for parental choice according to different scenarios.

The chapter starts with a discussion of the importance of the catchment system for school choice in Eastland followed by a review of the extent of change in inter-catchment flows between 1991 and 1995. In previous chapters, parental choice was viewed in a variety of ways. Theoretical perspectives were explored at a variety of spatial scales; the results of the GIS analysis were set out in a structure that reflected the various contextual factors in choice; the outcomes of the parental survey were related to the type of school chosen by parents. Here, in this final chapter, the consideration of contextual factors in parental choice is structured spatially, examining in turn the decision-making processes of parents in rural, suburban and urban catchments. The factors affecting the intakes of grammar and denominational schools are discussed separately. Various theoretical perspectives

were evaluated in Chapter Three. Although this is a primarily empirical study, in the course of the research some light was thrown on the relevance and explanatory power of these perspectives in relation to the practice of parental choice of school. The chapter, and thesis, ends with reflection on the effectiveness of current parental choice policy in the light of some possible alternative future scenarios, together with recommendations for research that would better inform decisions in this area of policy.

9.2 The continuing relevance of catchments to parental choice.

This thesis contains a substantial, contextualised analysis of inter-catchment movement that examines many issues. Perhaps the most fundamental question it addresses is the extent to which the school catchment continues to be an influential constituent of the secondary school transfer process, as described by Jowett (1995) and Mayet (1997). How can so emblematic a feature of the traditional LEA-controlled transfer system persist in a liberalised environment characterised by individual choice and school marketing?

First, Eastland catchments were never water-tight. A third of children travelled to out-of-catchment schools at the start of the study, which marked the end of a long period of catchment reorganisation. The continuous presence of grammar and denominational schools in the local system has always resulted in out-of-catchment flows, in Old Northwick in particular. Furthermore, the LEA has never barred parents from choosing other comprehensive schools for their children, as was the case in some other authorities (Stillman and Maychell, 1986). The large disparities between many Old Northwick comprehensive PALs and their catchment populations, in one case a surplus of 100 children over the school's capacity of 270, reflect a long-established acceptance of high levels of catchment 'leakage'.

On the other hand, DfEE guidelines still recognised catchments as a legitimate over-subscription criterion. Certain schools were full at the end of the first round of preference expression, even when the year-6 population was at its lowest. As school rolls rose and spare capacity fell, the inclusion of designated catchments in Eastland's over-subscription criteria would make them become an increasingly important factor in deciding pupil destinations.

The degree to which Eastland catchments delineate the 'natural' coverage of school intakes varies considerably. Substantial out-of-catchment movement is unlikely for a highly rural school such as RC2 because of sheer distance. Parents in suburban New Northwick tended to see either of their local schools as a natural destination for their children. Here, catchment boundaries were significant only when over-subscription criteria came into play. In Old Northwick, parents were more likely to see the catchment school as the local school, even if they were not particularly loyal to it. There is further discussion of these contrasts in attitude to catchment schools below.

De facto and *de jure* catchments correspond most closely to each other in the cases of the most and least popular secondary schools, which tend to be located in the most affluent and deprived parts of the city (compare the maps of school *de facto* and *de jure* catchments in Appendix 1 with the map of the social geography of Northwick in Figure 4.1 for confirmation of this pattern). The 'home-to-school' distance over-subscription criterion discriminated against children living a significant distance from the catchments of successful schools, whilst unpopular schools struggled to attract anyone from outside their catchment. For other schools the *de facto* and *de jure* catchments might be considerably different. However, in these cases it was unlikely that an alteration of catchment boundaries would provide a simple solution to this mismatch. The areas supplying pupils

from other catchments often varied over time, and even when patterns were more stable only a sub-set of local children would reject the local school. Though one or two parents living just outside the catchment boundary of popular schools were unhappy about what they saw as their arbitrary nature, on the whole there was an uncritical acceptance of the *status quo*. Indeed, the study period is notable for the stability of the catchment system following a decade of flux.

This stability reflects the 'dynamic equilibrium' that characterised relations between schools and the LEA in the study period. Paradoxically, although increased exercise of parental choice may have reduced the significance of the catchment system in deciding a school's intake, it has probably become more difficult to make changes to those boundaries. Home-school distance is the final criterion in deciding entry to over-subscribed schools and it would be theoretically possible to abolish catchments and use distance as the only spatial measure to be used in these circumstances. Indeed, using GIS technology, it would be possible to estimate home-school *journey times* for children and this would be a better measure of which school is most convenient for a child, and this possibility is discussed later in this chapter. However, schools and parents are now so sensitive to the extent that they would be 'winners' or 'losers' as a result of such changes that they would be politically difficult to implement.

De facto catchments are, though, much easier to change than *de jure* boundaries. Schools were not found to be so competitive as to market themselves aggressively in other schools' catchments. They did, though, use more subtle approaches, typified by the successful lobbying for the inclusion of bus routes serving Eastland secondary schools in the secondary transfer documentation provided for parents. In fact, transport provision was the simplest way for a school to extend its *de facto* catchment, either through schools

marketing themselves to parents living on existing public and private bus routes, or by parents arranging their own bus services to a desired school.

It is clear that there is no inevitability about the catchment system as implemented. The grammar and denominational schools, whose catchment boundaries only affect eligibility for free transport to school, have intakes characterised by their sparseness and their geographical extent. The average grammar school pupil travels about 5 km. to school compared with about 3 km. for denominational school pupils and just over 1 km. for comprehensive school pupils. Removal of geographic over-subscription criteria could lead to similarly extensive *de facto* catchments for the most popular comprehensives. Children were travelling over 4 km. across the city to attend the New Northwick comprehensive schools that were less popular and hence had more spare places; presumably the removal of over-subscription limits would result in even greater numbers of pupils making similar journeys to the more popular schools. Equally, an LEA with increased powers might choose to direct children to the local catchment school (and accentuate the importance of indirect choice through house purchase). The current balance between these two extremes appears reasonably successful, but if the reduced freedom of choice resulting from rising school rolls is accompanied by even greater demand for out-of-catchment schools, dissatisfaction with the catchment system as currently constituted will inevitably increase.

9.3. Extent and nature of change in the study period.

9.3.1 Introduction.

The overall trend in out-of-catchment movement is reviewed here. Combining the GIS and the survey analysis enables the parental motivation underlying the increase in pupil movements to be considered.

9.3.2 Overall change in out-of-catchment movement.

Generally, liberalisation of rights to parental choice seems to have led to an increase in the permeability of school catchments. Out-of-catchment movements increased by 6% from 33% to 39% in the study-period and the mean home-school journey distance also increased from 2.78 km. to 3.15 km. Even those parents choosing the local comprehensive believe themselves to be making a positive choice, with attendance at open days/evenings providing an opportunity for them to fulfil their duty as 'education consumers', the role envisaged by Chubb and Moe (1990). Although the parents of just one cohort were interviewed, LEA staff and Heads all considered that parents were increasingly aware of their right to choose and more likely to be active in making use of that right, in line with the findings in Scotland (Adler *et al*, 1988). In the case study area, following the legislative changes relating to parental choice in the 1988 Education Reform Act, parents have become more active in the local education market place, the outcome desired by the drafters of the Act.

An important finding in this research was the degree to which the increase in active use of choice did not appear limited to parents of higher social status. Indeed, given the traditional attachment of working-class parents to a local school, the 'aspiring working-class' probably has most to gain from true parental choice. Their local school is often perceived as unsatisfactory and generally boasts objectively inferior academic results to schools in the middle-class catchments which are, theoretically, open to all now. The evidence from interviews and the GIS analysis revealed that this group was indeed actively participating in choice and making careful judgements on the most appropriate choice of school for their children (although, as Gewirtz *et al* (1995) found, they were not always so well informed as middle-class parents). The proportion of parents living in lower status neighbourhoods

that practised active parental choice was as high or higher than that for those living in more affluent areas. However, this apparent consistency between groups in the practice of parental choice disguises the fact that middle-class parents have much less need to make an active choice. Put simply, the geography of perceived excellence in schools tends to parallel the geography of social class. The strong link between social status and educational attainment, and the increased stress laid on examination league tables, is likely to reinforce this relationship. In the absence of league tables that provide much more sophisticated and effective measurement of the real quality of schools, the discriminatory effects of a catchment system that guarantees an 'acceptable' school to those with most economic and educational resources, will continue. Even with accurate information of schools' educational quality, many parents would probably still prefer an 'adequate' school in a 'safe' area to an academically superior school in an environment perceived as 'threatening' to their children.

However, this research shows that social status is but one of a number of contextual factors affecting a parent's decision-making process. The generally middle-class parents living in New Northwick, content with the local school to which the majority of their neighbours send their children, have little need to look elsewhere. These catchments only lose between 5% and 12% of their pupils and over 80% of the exports are to grammar schools. Parents here appeared to have a very limited 'landscape of choice' in comparison, for example, with the parents of a bright child from a deprived neighbourhood in Old Northwick, who are unhappy with the local school and have considered other comprehensives, grammar and denominational schools as alternatives.

Factors that were found to be potentially important in choice include geographical location, the level of correspondence between the social background of parents and the intake of the

local school, the availability of transport, the types of school that are easily accessible and the parents' own educational history. The importance of these different contextual factors in choice is considered later in this chapter. Here, one of those considerations, geographical location, is used to structure a summary of how parents were found to behave in different contexts. Very different patterns of choice, in general, were identified in Old Northwick, New Northwick and the rural hinterland. This is a case-study and any generalisation of a relationship between parental behaviour and neighbourhood type to the rest of the country must be extremely tentative. However, the limited choice available in rural catchments (Stillman and Maychell, 1986), the relationship between the suburban schools' academic performance and the middle-class characteristics of their intake (Sammons *et al*, 1994) and the concerns over physical 'safety' and educational standards in urban catchments (Dore and Prestage, 1995) have all been identified in these and other studies, and are probably universal within the UK educational system.

9.3.3 Rural catchments.

Although there was an overall increase in out-of-catchment movement from approximately 10 to 13% in rural areas in the study period, the trend was less substantial than the pattern found in Northwick. This, at least partly, reflects the fact that solid statistical trends are less likely here, given that there are only three rural secondary schools and a low number of rural parents are choosing out-of-catchment schools. The majority of those who rejected the local catchment comprehensive valued the high academic standards of the grammar schools and were prepared for their children to undertake a long journey every day. Not included in the study were those with the resources to send their children to private schools, which provide about 10% of the secondary places available in these catchments. These children apart, rural catchment losses were almost entirely limited to those living on

the urban fringe where a Northwick comprehensive school was more convenient. On the whole, though, the rural comprehensive schools were more popular with those living in their catchments than the urban schools across the catchment border and losses to grammar and private schools were compensated by a small influx of predominantly middle-class children from Northwick.

On the whole, parents appeared satisfied with their local school. However, rural parents appeared to perceive themselves as 'consumers' even if there was only one 'item on the shelf'. Limited choice was a source of irritation for some parents, but this should not be over-stated. Dissatisfaction with the choice system was much higher elsewhere, where the extent of choice was greatest. Rural comprehensive intakes covered a wide social spectrum but the overall level of affluence in these areas, and their geographical isolation, guarantees these schools a stable supply of the sort of children that any of the urban comprehensives would be happy to attract.

9.3.4 Suburban catchments.

The apparently high level of outflows, varying from 27 to 40%, from the suburban New Northwick catchments does not reflect a high level of dissatisfaction with local schools. This is because, in most cases, it is the adjacent suburban comprehensive that is being chosen and the proportion of children travelling outside the home suburb is at a modest level, comparable with outflows from rural catchments. New Northwick is predominantly middle-class and the local comprehensive schools are a clear reflection of the social character of their intake. Apart from the 10% or less who opt for grammar schools, parents in New Northwick are generally content for their children to attend the local schools, which are convenient, whose intake is predominantly middle-class, and whose academic results compare favourably with almost every other comprehensive in Old Northwick. Thus,

'selection by mortgage' continues here, as elsewhere (Carroll and Walford, 1996), to provide an extremely important element in middle-class advantage in school choice. It should be noted, though, that more parents would enter their children for the 11-plus if the consequences of failure were not the possible loss of a place at the catchment comprehensive.

There is, however, some spare capacity in all of these schools. Many Old Northwick children make the journey each day from the mixed residential neighbourhoods of the old city to these suburban schools that are perceived to be relatively free from drugs and bullying, and are attaining higher academic standards than are available locally. The GIS analysis suggests and the parental survey confirms that such imports tend to increase the social heterogeneity of New Northwick intakes, but at the expense of the greater homogeneity of Old Northwick intakes. Many of the urban parents choosing suburban schools have working-class backgrounds but these schools import preferentially from the higher status neighbourhoods of the exporting catchments. The GIS analysis showed that 70% of exports from Old Northwick to New Northwick were from neighbourhoods that can be characterised as middle-class, whereas children from these neighbourhoods constitute only 38% of exports to catchments within Old Northwick. The survey showed that the parents of the majority of these middle-class exports to the suburbs correspond to those identified by Dore and Prestage (1995) as most unhappy with their children attending schools that reflect the mixed social characteristics of the local neighbourhood. These suburban schools are socially 'cream-skimming' the urban catchments.

As pupil rolls rise, excess capacity decreases and, assuming New Northwick comprehensives remain locally popular, imports must also reduce. This leads towards a situation whereby the most popular suburban schools have a very localised *de facto*

catchment and choice of the schools generally perceived as 'best' is limited to the more affluent parents. In the study period, Old Northwick parents unhappy with local schools always had a suburban safety net. This was available because of the particularly adverse demographics pertaining to one New Northwick school, NNC4, which needs to fill over half of its places with children from outside its catchment. This has provided an outlet for such parents. Journeys are made from all over the city with public bus routes playing an important part in making this school accessible to children living the other side of New Northwick. The importance of public transport in determining NNC4's *de facto* catchment lends support to the view of Hirsch (1995) that there is great potential in the UK for the use of public transport as a means of increasing the practical availability of school choice to all parents.

However, rising rolls are likely to lead to a similar reduction in the extent of this school's *de facto* catchment and, as a result, the New and Old Northwick secondary systems will become more self-contained. Parents' dissatisfaction may increase markedly, as they become increasingly aware of the gap between their perception of school-choice as a right and the reality that attendance at the most popular schools is unlikely if over-subscription criteria are not satisfied.

9.3.5 Urban catchments.

The urban catchments of Old Northwick are characterised by a diversity of schools and neighbourhoods that contrasts strongly with New Northwick. Though all the catchments are more deprived than those in suburbia and the countryside, pockets of considerable affluence co-exist with areas experiencing considerable levels of deprivation. Parents in Old Northwick perceived an educational landscape that is much more highly developed than that experienced elsewhere in the study area. This is reflected in the greater number of

schools that were considered in the choice process in this part of the study area. In Old Northwick parents interviewed in the survey perceived over 4.4 schools, on average, as suitable and accessible for their child. In New Northwick the figure was 3.5 and in the rural catchments 2.5. Indeed, parents, of high and low social status in deprived catchments tended to consider seriously more schools than parents in middle-class catchments. Suburban parents may possess greater cultural capital than their inner-city counterparts, but they have little need to use it. It is dissatisfaction with the local school and the availability of alternatives that appears to characterise the parents who are most active in their choice of school.

Old Northwick catchments exhibit the highest levels of permeability and there are several reasons for this. First, the grammar and denominational schools are located here and historically they have taken the majority of their intake from this part of the city (approximately 70% of grammar school and 90% of denominational school pupils). The 'flight from the inner-city' discussed earlier sees a significant outflow to the suburban comprehensives with no counter-balancing inflow. All these losses tend to reduce the level of academic attainment of the local comprehensives and only one performs as well as the suburban and rural comprehensives. Additionally, the social 'cream-skimming' that characterises these pupil flows increases the proportion of children of lower social status in the school intake, so that behaviour such as bullying and drug-taking is more likely to be perceived as a problem for that school. In this context, rejection of the local option is much more likely, either on educational or social grounds. The majority of middle-class parents, in these catchments are highly likely to choose elsewhere. This finding is based on both the GIS analysis, where middle-class parents are defined as those living in middle-class neighbourhoods, and the parental survey, where middle-class status was assigned according

to parents' occupational classification. Parents of lower social status in these catchments were quite likely to reject the local school as well. Fifty-five percent of parents surveyed allocated to Occupational Classes IIIa and above secured places for their children in out-of-catchment schools. For lower status parents the figure was 53%. As Gewirtz *et al* (1995) found, 'aspiring' working-class parents are an important component of the 'flight to the suburbs'.

However, parents living in 'working-class' neighbourhoods of the city were much more likely to choose an Old Northwick school as an alternative to the catchment comprehensive than those living in more 'middle-class' areas. Consequently, despite the large outflows of pupils, some urban comprehensives experience quite high levels of imports. Most of these are the children of lower social-status parents who are unhappy with the catchment school and prefer a neighbouring comprehensive. Convenience and locality continue to be important for most parents, but they are, perhaps, more likely to choose a nearby alternative if the local school is in any way unsatisfactory.

It is not inevitable, however, that inner-city schools become sink-schools. The schools in the most deprived areas tend to have good buildings and facilities - a result of the LEA providing them with extra resources relative to other schools in the past. Pupil-led funding has, however, reversed the bias in resource allocation so that popular schools in the more affluent areas are receiving the most income. However, loyalty to the local school is stronger amongst parents in deprived areas and this loyalty limits the losses from potential sink schools. In this respect, schools with a heterogeneous social intake are most vulnerable to the impact of increased parental choice. It is possible for an urban school with a socially balanced intake to retain the majority of local pupils if its reputation is good. However, once this reputation is lost, it is virtually impossible to recruit more than a

small proportion of the local middle-class population if a suitable alternative is available to them. This occurred in the case of ONC2 which now exports almost 60% of its catchment pupils, including most of those living in middle-class neighbourhoods, and imports less than 15% of its intake. The increasing awareness by the 'aspiring' working-class of their 'right' to parental choice exacerbates the situation.

For all social groups the community grapevine is vital in conveying the image of a school, for better or worse, to the population of parents of potential pupils. Rumours of drugs or bullying can undo years of investment in improving academic performance and schools have become correspondingly defensive about their image. Many of the interviewed parents who lived in Old Northwick and chose an out-of-catchment school did so because of the neighbourhood perception of the local school. The lack of control over the events that adversely affect a school's reputation can severely limit Heads' ability to plan ahead on the basis of reliable forecasts of student numbers in the immediate future, let alone in the longer term.

The main tool still available to the LEA to counter a school's decline is the introduction of a new, capable, charismatic Head. This tactic has been effective in stabilising the fortunes of more than one school, ONC 9, for example. Furthermore, rising rolls are limiting the number of spare places available elsewhere (see Table 4.1). However, it is difficult to see how the majority of Old Northwick schools could ever effectively compete with the suburban comprehensives, let alone the grammar schools, in a completely free market, where popular schools increased their intake and new schools were built in the middle-class neighbourhoods, primarily suburban, preferred by many parents.

In summary, the greatest extent of choice exists in Old Northwick alongside the greatest amount of dissatisfaction with the quality of that choice. This unhappiness will probably increase as rising rolls reduce the ability of these parents to gain places for their children in comprehensives in more affluent areas. Levels of local inter-catchment movement are likely to remain high as parents unhappy with the local option seek places at schools in neighbouring catchments perceived as being of marginally higher quality. Fluctuations in movements are also likely to be high as only one of the schools has a strong academic reputation and a stable middle-class intake, so that relative differences are small. Moreover, new Heads, or the community grapevine, are able to change patterns relatively easily.

9.4 Grammar and denominational schools.

Old Northwick's grammar and denominational schools have continued to prosper in recent years. The denominational schools are rarely far from capacity whilst the grammar schools are unique in Eastland in their absence of a ceiling on pupil numbers (as the LEA guarantees a place for everyone who passes the 11-plus). Denominational and, especially, grammar schools' *de facto* catchments are characterised by their wider geographical range and the absence of a concentrated cluster of pupils living close to the school.

9.4.1 Grammar schools

The three grammar schools tend to recruit a higher proportion of their pupils from more deprived areas than do rural and suburban comprehensives. The preference of most New Northwick parents for the safe choice of a 'pleasant' local comprehensive has been discussed. For rural parents, distance alone is a disincentive. However, the grammars are not as socially egalitarian as is implied by this comparison. Within Old Northwick, which provides the majority of their intake, they 'cream-skim', differentially attracting pupils

from the most affluent neighbourhoods in every catchment. Often these are middle-class parents who are confident in the ability of their children to pass the 11-plus. Those who are less confident are much more likely to seek a place in a New Northwick comprehensive. If parents knew the 11-plus results before they declared their first preferences, there would undoubtedly be a higher number of children taking the examination. LEA transfer procedures are clearly, at least in this instance, as important an influence on catchment permeability as Stillman and Maychell (1986) found them to be in the early 1980s. This remains the case, though, only as long as all the grammar Heads remain within the system, co-operating with the LEA. Recent changes in this area are discussed later in this chapter.

Grammar, denominational and private schools are the only single-sex schools available to parents in Eastland, and it might have been assumed that choice of such a school would reflect the preference of many parents for single-sex education. However, this issue is a good example of the contextuality of choice. A quarter of the survey interviewees in Old Northwick said they would prefer a single-sex school for their child. In New Northwick and rural Eastland, where all state schools are mixed, only one interviewee shared this opinion. Clearly, the availability of an educational option, and the acceptability of the local product, influence the degree to which a particular educational issue features in parents' 'landscape of choice'. Instances, such as this, reinforce the dangers of studies evaluating policy implementation through simple questionnaires without contextualising such responses in the interaction of the subject with the policy in question.

6.4.2 Denominational schools

Parents in the more deprived parts of Old Northwick, who are not confident of 11-plus success and are unhappy with the local comprehensive, often choose the denominational option. While the majority of the intake is Roman Catholic, it is not obligatory and several

parents were interviewed who chose the school primarily because of the quality and focus of the education provided. Indeed, the relatively low importance of religious belief as a factor in school choice is emphasised by the fact that so few children from New Northwick travel to the denominational schools.

In conclusion, parents choosing grammar and denominational schools are much less concerned with locality and convenience. This partly reflects the characteristics of parents choosing these options but it often results from a deep antipathy towards the local comprehensive that is much more prevalent in Old Northwick.

9.5 School choice in Eastland - a variety of theoretical perspectives.

In Chapter Three a variety of theoretical perspectives was used as a means of briefly highlighting different aspects of choice and suggesting appropriate methods of investigation in this study. It seems appropriate at this point to evaluate, again briefly, the extent to which these same theoretical perspectives have proved useful or productive in this study.

Systems and chaos theory proved useful as a heuristic aid in the analysis of pupil movements. Schools are clearly not operating in a vacuum and the fortunes of any one school will be affected by the actions of all the other schools in the local educational market. The potential for 'positive feedback' leading to the development of 'sink schools' (Adler *et al*, 1989) was clear, but this process was significantly 'dampened' by the failure of popular schools to expand, and the unwillingness of secondary heads to compete aggressively with one another.

Instances of the 'butterfly effect' were identified, illustrating the way that consequences of processes in one school catchment can affect schools many miles away. A good example is

the way that the changing relative popularity of NNC3 and NNC4, together with NNC4's adverse catchment demographics, combined with the availability of suitable public transport to substantially affect the out-of-catchment movement losses of ONC9 many miles away on the other side of the city. The radical changes in patterns of organisation arising from small changes in particular system parameters that are characteristically found in complexity models would be even more likely to emerge in an unregulated market in school choice.

The importance of LEA secondary transfer procedures in influencing school choices has been clearly demonstrated. Thus, managerialist perspectives are appropriate here. For instance, the timing of the 11 plus examination so that parents could not know the outcome before the first round of preference expression affected the decisions of many parents. If the announcement of the 11 plus results was made earlier it is probable that there would be greater levels of exports from the catchments of schools likely to be over-subscribed. Such a rule change has been determinedly resisted by the comprehensive schools most vulnerable to the consequences. The LEA's role in gaining the agreement of all schools to a common transfer procedure is characterised by numerous disputes over such apparently minor procedural matters. They, therefore, retain an important ability to influence choice outcomes through their mediation of the choice system prescribed by national government.

In contrast, no significant evidence was found supporting the expectation expressed by Gewirtz *et al* (1995) amongst others, that secondary schools would increasingly use managerialist methods to practice covert selection in order to improve their school's academic performance. On the one hand, the nature of the study was unlikely to reveal any such practices. On the other, the evidence of the study was that popular schools had little need to actively select because 'selection by mortgage' guaranteed the most popular

schools an acceptable intake.

Whilst LEA administrative practices clearly affected choice patterns, the legislative limitations on an LEA's ability to intervene actively in the local educational market mean that this influence is marginal. Only 10% of parents interviewed failed to request as their first preference the school that, in an ideal world, they would actually have preferred for their child. Only 10% failed to secure their first preference. Thus, over 80% of children transferred to the parents' genuine first choice secondary school. Over a third of parents secured a place for their child at an out-of-catchment school. There is a very active educational market in Eastland and the Conservative government's aim of minimising LEA influence in this process has been realised to a considerable degree.

However, the regulation of the market by the LEA and the failure of heads to compete aggressively meant that the local educational market fell some way short of the freedom desired by the New Right. There are inequities in the market as well. First, financial resources are still important in the access they give to the private sector or for transport to distant schools. More significantly for this thesis, 'spatial resources' in respect to school choice are not evenly distributed. The combination of living in a deprived neighbourhood and disadvantage in access to popular schools is a source of great inequality for many in the choice system as constituted.

The findings of this thesis fully support the emphasis placed by Harvey (1973) on the importance of urban spatial differentiation on the reproduction of social disadvantage. Such inequalities would not surprise Marxist analysts of this issue. Further detailed consideration of the relationship between economic structures and educational chances was outside the scope of this study. However, it is possible to view the expansion of school

choice as a means of servicing the changing needs of the UK economy (enlarged service sector, decline in manufacturing). This is achieved by allowing greater access to 'middle-class' education for children from traditionally working-class neighbourhoods, leaving a rump of 'sink schools' for the future unemployed 'underclass'. In this respect, the secondary school transfer system, spatial inequality apart, appeared to be a 'level playing field' in socio-economic terms. However, when it was necessary, in determinedly pursuing the appeals process, for example, middle-class interviewees demonstrated the greater degree of cultural capital that contributes to middle-class advantage in access to education (Adler *et al.*, 1989; Bradford, 1991; Ball, 1993).

Despite all the statistical generalisations and identification of 'class effects', school choice was often found to be a distinctly individual process where, although parents were affected by a host of contextual factors, their professed concern was, almost without exception, the happiness of their child. Parents from similar social backgrounds living in the same neighbourhoods could come to very different decisions, often because of variation in the 'perceived needs of their child. The group is predictable, the individual parent certainly is not.

Middle-class parents did, on the whole, place greater emphasis on academic criteria in their choice processes and the greater emphasis on locality expressed by parents of lower social status may well support the views of Goldthorpe (1996) on rational choice. The lower rewards for working-class children that are likely to be provided by the academic gains possible at an out-of-catchment school often do not justify the extra effort involved in getting there for such pupils.

The most helpful theoretical perspective used in this study proved to be realism. Whilst parents were making decisions that reflected their perceptions of the needs of their child, their final choices were often heavily circumscribed by the attitudes of their peers, their own social status relative to the ethos of the local school, historic patterns of pupil movements and the practicalities of LEA procedures, all mediated by the spatially variable extent of choice. Any study which ignored any of these features would be deficient in its explanatory value. That is not say that this study is perfect in that respect. Much greater analysis of processes relating to choice within families and schools would have greatly enriched the study. However, these aspects of the choice process have been extensively covered by Gewirtz *et al* (1995) whereas the relative shortage of empirical outcomes in their study is complemented by this work.

There are numerous examples of the ways in which a holistic approach benefited the study. A social survey alone, for example, would have shown that apparently similar parents expressed very contrasting views about the choice process. By placing the survey findings in the context of the GIS analysis, though, it was possible to see how parental attitudes were affected by various contextual choice factors, particularly their relative social status compared with the local school's intake and the prevailing patterns of choice in their locality. Perhaps most importantly, the combination of GIS analysis and social survey showed that, although different social groups may have been characterised by similar levels of out-of-catchment movement, the quality of, or importance attached to, their choices varied considerably between groups, generally dependent on where they lived.

All the theoretical perspectives helped to some extent in exploring Eastland's landscapes of choice and the value of combining all them in an eclectic approach are hopefully

demonstrated in this thesis.

9.6. Future policy - local and national.

9.6.1 Introduction

The focus now shifts to prospects for the future of the Eastland secondary transfer system. Two recent events at the national and local political scale have significantly affected parental choice in the area. First, the election of a Labour Government in May 1997 signalled an end to the possibility of implementing of more extreme visions of a free-market in education. Second, local government re-organisation resulted in the loss of the rural catchments from the Eastland area and the formation of a purely urban LEA. There are also new political masters - a Labour council committed to multi-agency approaches to social problems and favouring a more 'hands-on' approach to educational issues than was normal with the County Council. This section discusses the impact of these, and other, changes on the Eastland secondary transfer system, now and in the future, as well as making recommendations for future policy in the light of this research.

9.6.2 Secondary transfer and national policy.

The policy of the new Labour government towards parental choice and secondary transfer has now been translated into legislation (DfEE, 1998). To a certain extent, the balance of power has swung back to LEAs, who will have the responsibility of ensuring that secondary transfer procedures are fair for all parents. An arbitrator will be put in place to adjudicate complaints about the equity of LEA arrangements. Such a policy should ensure that the type of transfer policy seen in Eastland, with the LEA facilitating transfer procedures on parents' and schools' behalf, becomes more, rather than less, common.

Furthermore, the Labour government is less favourable towards grant-maintained schools than the Conservative governments were. This is important for Eastland as one of the

grammar schools has opted for grant-maintained status since the end of the study. One more school opting out would have triggered the introduction of joint control of transfer procedures between the Funding Agency for Schools and the LEA. Furthermore, there was a real danger that the dynamic equilibrium that sustained co-operation between the schools would disappear if defections to grant-maintained status continued, because the benefits of partnership (for the stronger schools) were out-weighed by the freedom offered by opting out of LEA control. The change to a government much less committed to reducing local government powers has greatly reduced the attractions of this option.

This thesis has demonstrated the extent to which secondary schools can be very dependent on the processes and events elsewhere in the local educational market, over which they may have very little control. The stress by the Labour government on the ability of the individual school (DfEE, 1998) to improve its performance without reference to its relationships with other schools in the system may lead to unrealistic expectations and invalid conclusions. Unrealistic expectations because historic patterns of choice may deny a school the most able pupils from its catchment. Invalid conclusions because an improvement in a school's academic performance may simply reflect a change in the socio-economic characteristics of its intake rather than any improvement in teaching quality (Gibson and Asthana, 1998). Judgement of the true performance of secondary schools together with efficient allocation of resources and management of the local system, is not best achieved by the centre. LEAs are the bodies best placed to understand and manage the local market and it is important that they are, at the very least, full partners in any initiatives such as Special Education Action Zones, designed to improve school performance or educational equity.

Labour have not opted for any major change in the way that parental choice operates nationally. Lack of action in this respect represents an acceptance of the *status quo* with regard to the socio-spatial inequality in access to school choice revealed by this thesis. The policy of improving inner-city schools so that parents have no wish to send their children elsewhere is laudable, but the desired results may be difficult to achieve, given the many advantages of schools located in more affluent areas that have been set out in this thesis. There are alternative policies available, but which are most appropriate depends on the outcome desired. If equality of access to the best schools is the goal, then the subsidy of transport from deprived catchments to popular schools, together with the use of ballots, as suggested by Adler (in the event of over-subscription, would ensure much greater equity. On the other hand, many inner-city parents much prefer to send their child to the local school. The current tendency of the school choice process to disadvantage schools in deprived areas could be countered by an amendment to pupil-funding such that the money attached to a pupil would be proportional to the level of deprivation of their home neighbourhood. Such a policy would reduce middle-class advantage in access to popular schools in a very simple and practical manner, enabling potential sink schools to afford to pay for the extra teaching resources they need.

9.6.3 Secondary transfer and local policy.

The uneasy alliance of Eastland secondary schools was threatened by the prospect of the transition to unitary status for Northwick (excluding the rural catchments) and a Labour council controlling education policy in the city. Northwick councillors would have different priorities to the county council and there were fears amongst some schools that resources for secondary education would not be maintained at the same level. As was noted

above, the election of the national Labour government greatly reduced the advantages for schools opting out of LEA control and further defections now appear unlikely.

It is already clear that the new Labour-run, urban LEA will have a far greater concern with the issues of social justice prominent elsewhere in the council agenda. In the light of the government's stress on education as a solution to many of society's problems, and its backing of multi-agency responses to the stresses of the inner-city, LEA officials are likely to be much more concerned with both the fortunes of the schools and the pupils in the more deprived areas of the city. Parental choice seems certain to remain in place, but the LEA already appears to be more pro-active than previously in the way it is addressing the problem of successful schools using exclusions as an indirect selection mechanism.

The parental choice policies practised by Eastland LEA, bearing in mind the constraints of the relevant legislation, appear to have achieved a reasonable balance between the rights of parents to secure the best school for their child and the need for a transparent, predictable, equitable secondary transfer system. However, there are a number of ways in which the system might be improved.

Many parents were unhappy with the lack of information about which schools were likely to be over-subscribed. Indeed, the Audit Commission has recommended that LEAs should state which schools have been over-subscribed recently in the secondary school transfer document sent to parents to guide them in the choice process. Eastland has adopted this proposal (after the end of the study) and this action should reduce the unfair advantage of those parents with a more nuanced understanding of the local education market in assessing the risks associated with particular choices.

As stated in the previous section, schools and parents are all interacting in a complex

system that is best understood by local actors and, at present, the LEA is the most appropriate body for this role. However, Eastland, and many other LEAs, could substantially improve its ability to monitor problems, trends and patterns in school choice by implementing a GIS system similar to that used in this study. Whilst accurate prediction of future trends in pupil movements might be unattainable because of the stochastic nature of some of the events that affect school popularity, such a system could allow ‘what-if’ analysis of alternative policies of school closure or building, for instance.

One of the main foci of this study has been the role of school catchments in affecting school choice. The definition of their boundaries was not perfect, although few parents were unhappy about the boundaries. However, there are ways of making spatial over-subscription criteria more spatially equitable. If a GIS was set up that included the facility to report the approximate time any home-school journey would take, then school catchments could be dropped from the over-subscription criteria and journey time (by foot or car) alone used as a measure of spatial differentiation. Despite the apparently greater equity of this method, it is recommended that catchments be retained for several reasons. First, catchments can take account of traditional links between particular neighbourhoods and a local school that may reflect physical boundaries and transport routes. Also, people know where they stand with catchment boundaries and can be secure about gaining a place at the local catchment school. ‘Notional home-school journey time’ is a much more tenuous concept and parents would probably find it much more difficult to evaluate their chances of gaining a place at a popular school under such a system.

Section 9.6.2 mentioned the potential for increasing access to popular schools by subsidising transport from deprived areas. This is not recommended for Eastland because of the adverse consequences for the schools in these deprived areas that would result from

such a policy. However, a major factor in the rejection of ONC6 by many parents was the perception that the journey to school was unsafe for children. Subsidised transport in such situations would both help such schools retain pupils, from their catchment, and ease the fears of parents who do choose the local option.

Finally, the timing of the 11 plus is seen by many parents to render the secondary transfer process grossly unfair. Announcing the results before the first round of preference expression would greatly reduce parental anxiety at the cost of reduced academic quality in the comprehensive sector. The best solution may well be the abolition of selection in Eastland, but if this should be the course taken, then every effort should be made to increase the quality of the urban comprehensive schools. If selection were abolished with no changes elsewhere, then a substantial number of middle-class parents would probably switch to the private sector whilst working-class children would be even further disadvantaged in access to popular schools.

Despite the criticisms that may be levelled at the operation of parental choice in Eastland, over 80% of the parents surveyed achieved the outcome they wanted and the role of the LEA as facilitator has enabled the schools to operate within a stable transfer system that avoids the excesses of free-market or centralised control models of choice. However, the *status quo* is far from perfect. The children of parents in deprived areas, or those less sophisticated in their ability to negotiate the subtleties of the secondary transfer system, continue to be disadvantaged. Parents continue to favour the local school, provided it is satisfactory. As long as society continues to be polarised spatially then it is difficult to conceive of an efficient and popular way of avoiding educational polarisation. In the current climate, moves towards greater diversity in the characteristics of secondary schools, so that they are differentiated by more than class, which is all that divides many in the eyes

of parents at present, appears potentially fruitful. However, the inequalities and inefficiencies of the secondary transfer system reflect wider structural socio-economic inequalities and it would be excessively over-optimistic to expect any transfer policy to effectively counter such fundamental forces within society.

9.7 Future research.

This thesis has revealed the complexity of the processes involved in school choice and some potential avenues of future research are suggested here.

The GIS study covered four years, the parental survey only one. Ideally, samples of each of the cohorts in this study would have been interviewed or completed questionnaires so that interactions between trends in pupil movements and parental attitudes could be identified and patterns of school choice better explained.

This is a case-study in one LEA area. Some of the findings, particularly those relating to spatial inequality in the choice system, are very likely to be replicated elsewhere. However, the presence of a selective system, the absence of substantial ethnic minorities and the limited interaction with catchments in other LEAs are just three of the features of this area that are absent in many LEAs elsewhere. Further case studies would help to identify those features of school choice that tend to be universal and those that are contingent on local circumstances.

This study recognised the importance of the link between educational attainment and social status in outcomes for schools and children. However, this study was limited by its failure to evaluate the relationship between parental choice and exam performance, for schools and for individuals, in the context of social background. In the light of the perceived inadequacy of current examination league tables such research would be extremely

valuable. In particular, evaluation of the degree to which improvement and decline in schools' academic performance is explained by social polarisation in school intakes would be particularly valuable.

Furthermore, this study, though placed in the context of theoretical perspectives on parental choice, was primarily empirical and was not designed to test one particular theoretical model of the choice process. Previous studies have been more theoretically informed, but lacked the evidence of the practical outcomes of choice that the methods used here provide. Even a study as rich in research findings as Gewirtz *et al* (1995) was vulnerable to criticism that its ethnographic approach was subjective, reflecting the authors' own prejudices, and lacking the support, and objective view, of choice outcomes. Such criticisms could not be sustained if studies of this type were buttressed by a GIS analysis in the manner of this study. As pupil postcode data becomes increasingly available from LEAs, there is no reason why future theoretically informed and ethnographic studies examining issues such as ethnicity, gender and class effects in school choice, should not be grounded in a GIS analysis of pupil movements in the study area.

9.8 Conclusion

In summary, liberalisation of parental choice has been followed by an increase in catchment permeability in the case study area. School choice is popular amongst the great majority of parents, though up to a fifth of parents fail to secure a place for their child at their first choice school. Furthermore, the uncertainties of the local market produced a great deal of stress amongst many parents. These uncertainties also make planning difficult for schools and LEAs.

While an increasing number of parents from deprived neighbourhoods are making use of choice, the system favours parents in middle-class areas for two main reasons. First, in the event of over-subscription, 'selection by mortgage' guarantees them a place in the most popular schools which are generally sited in middle-class neighbourhoods. Second, parents in deprived inner-city areas often still favour the local school, but these schools are disadvantaged by the 'cream-skimming' of their catchment by other schools, leading to a decline in academic results and the reduced funding received by schools with substantial surplus places. The previous two sections contained a number of recommendations on how such disadvantage might be reduced.

This study revealed the extent to which pupil movements in Eastland are an outcome of a complex system with a variety of important parameters. LEAs are best placed to understand and monitor such a system and the GIS methods used here are powerful ways of identifying patterns and trends in the local education market. In particular, they should have responsibility for facilitating secondary school transfers so that the system is open and transparent, with minimal uncertainty for parents.

Parental choice of secondary school may appear a simple process but this thesis has revealed a complex landscape of great diversity. This thesis is an empirical, local case study with all the disadvantages that such an approach entails. However, the combination of GIS analysis, parental survey and interviews with local actors proved an excellent way of exposing at least some of the realities underlying parental choice of secondary school.

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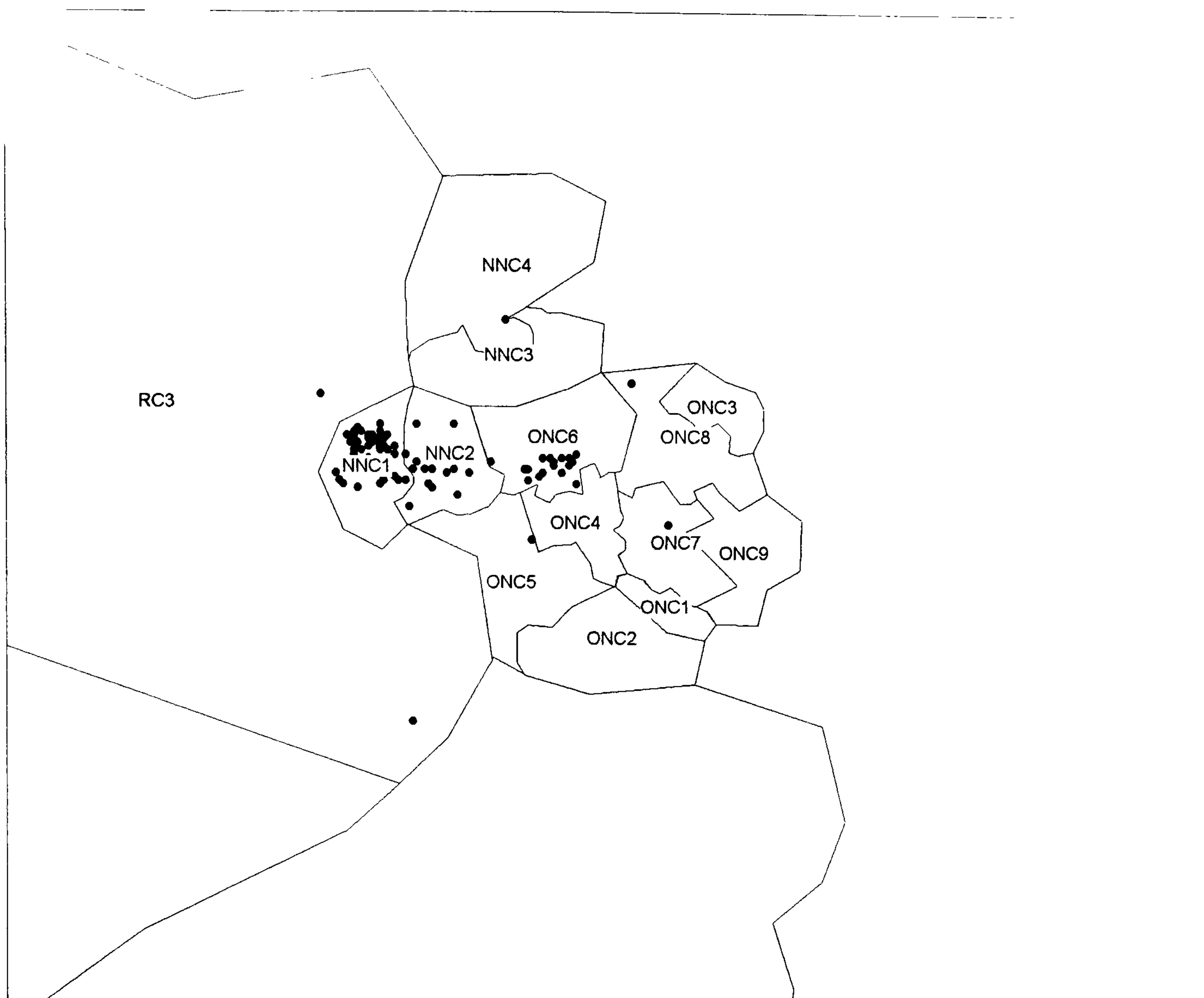
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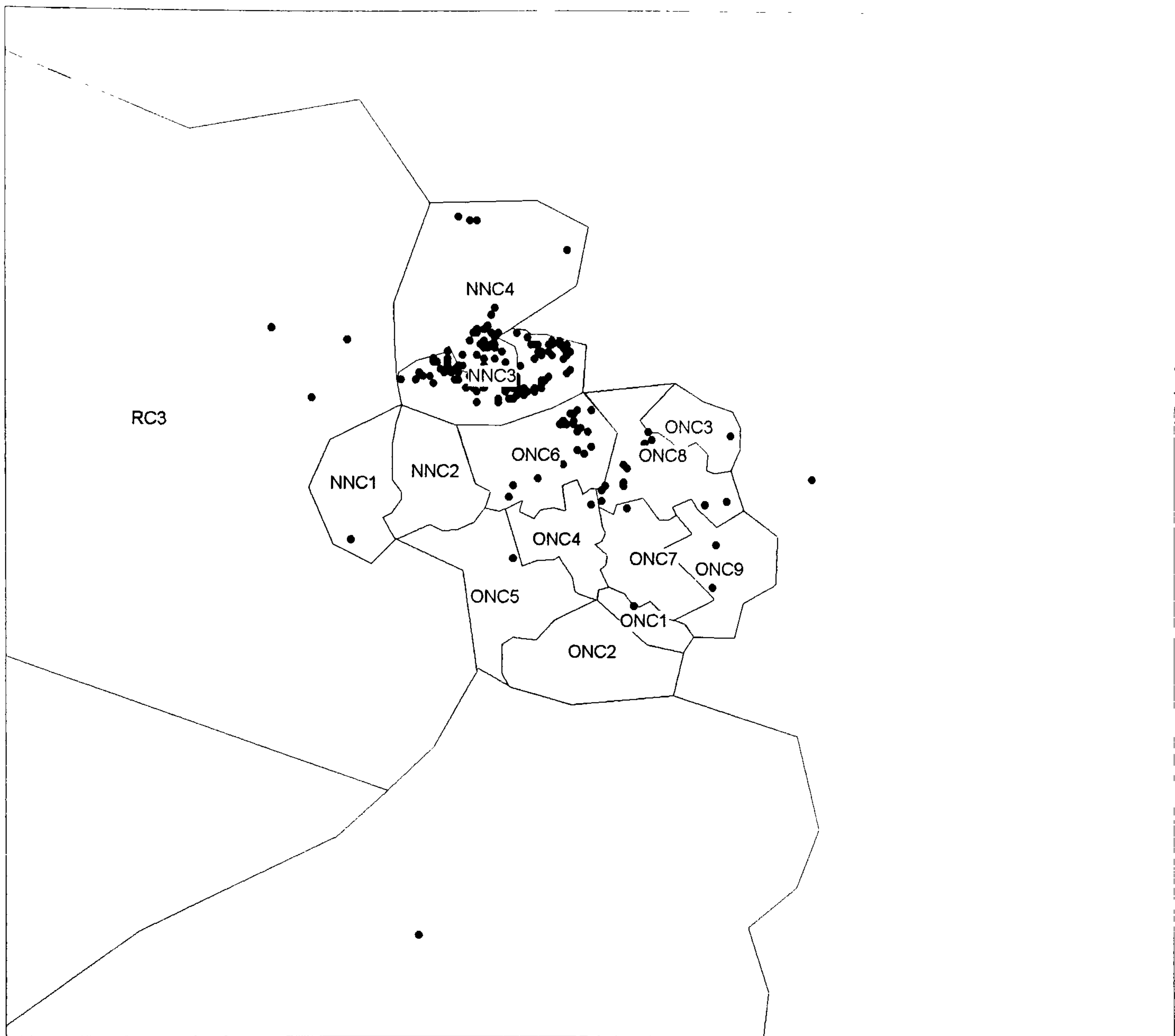
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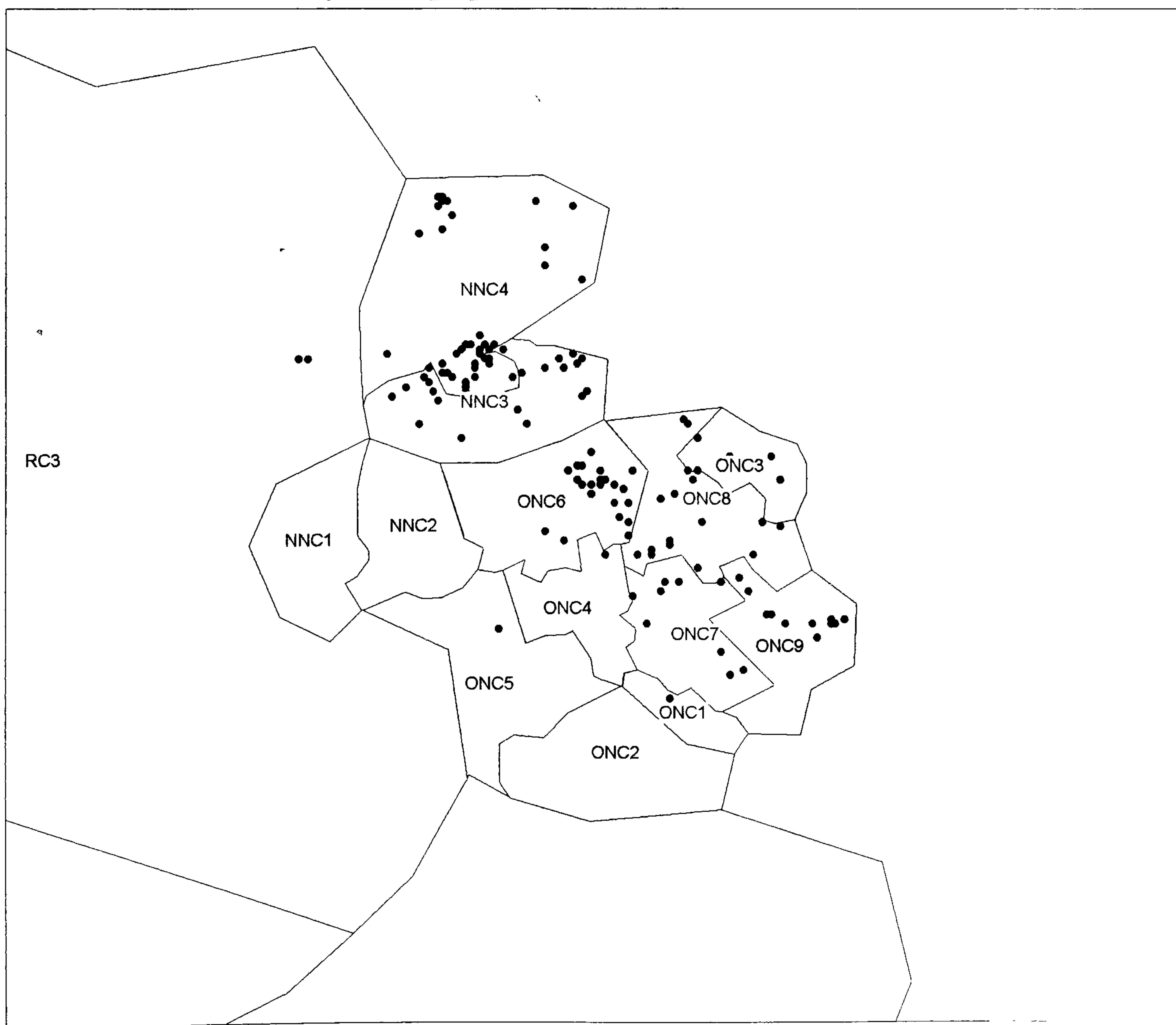
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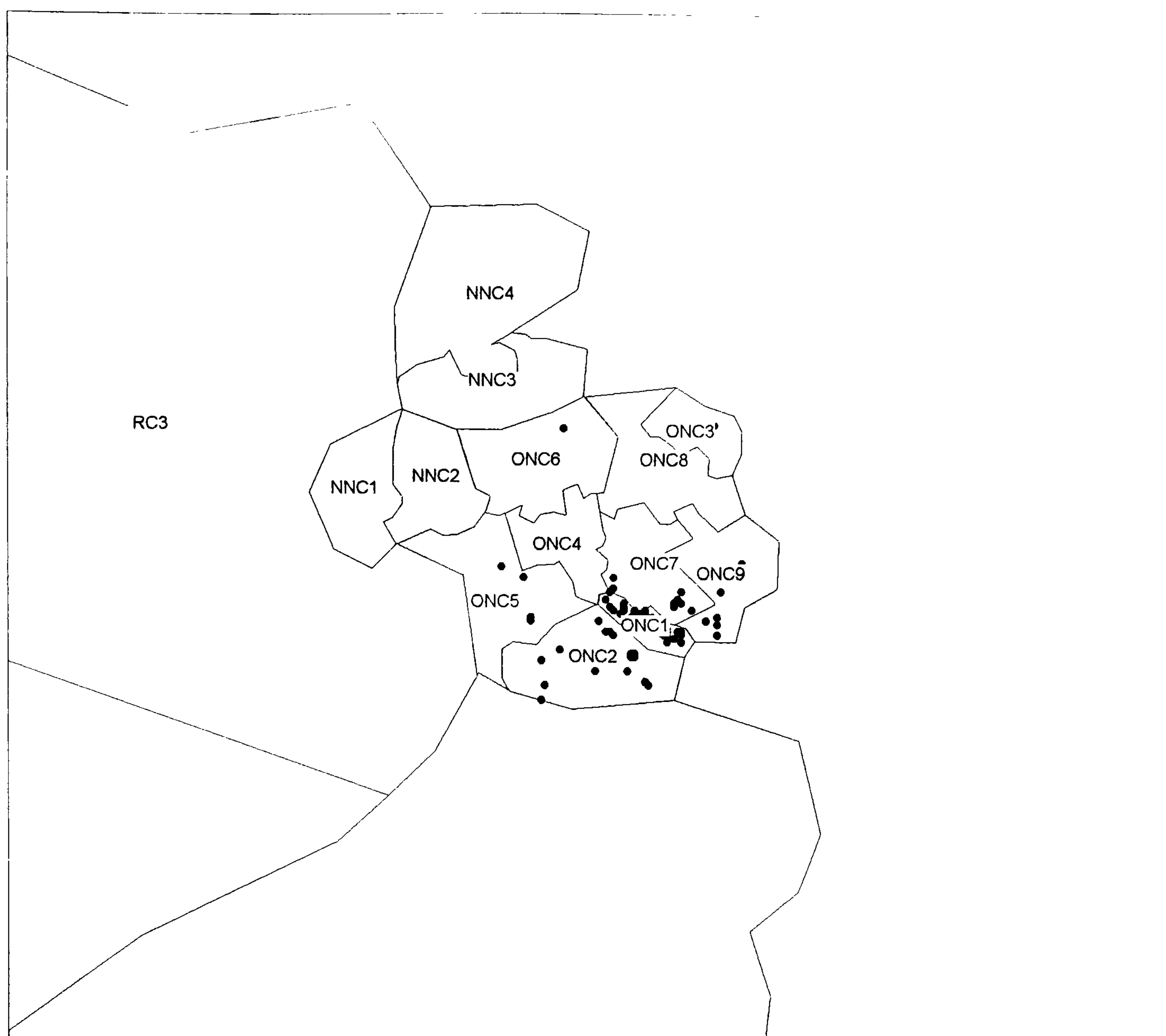
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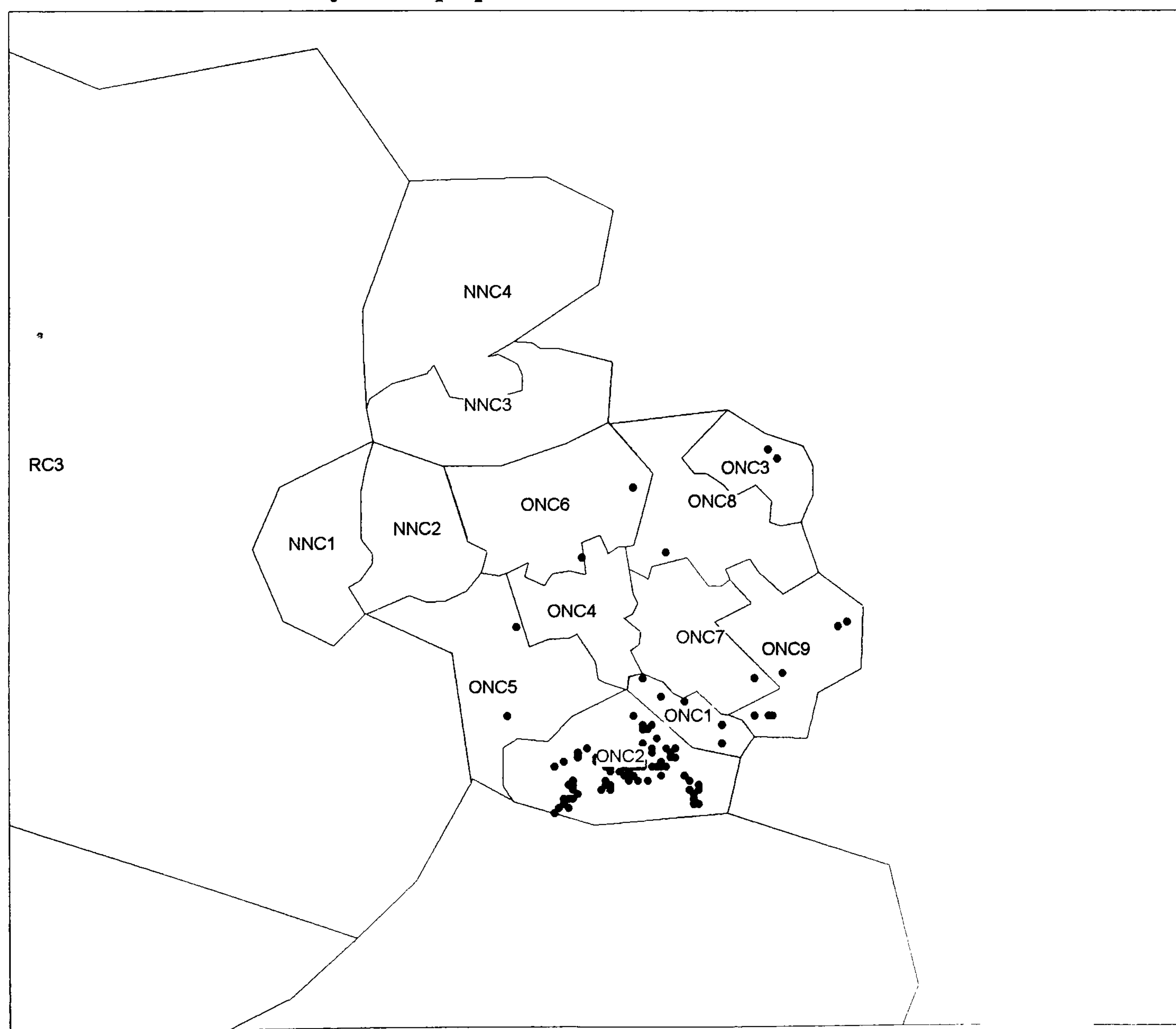
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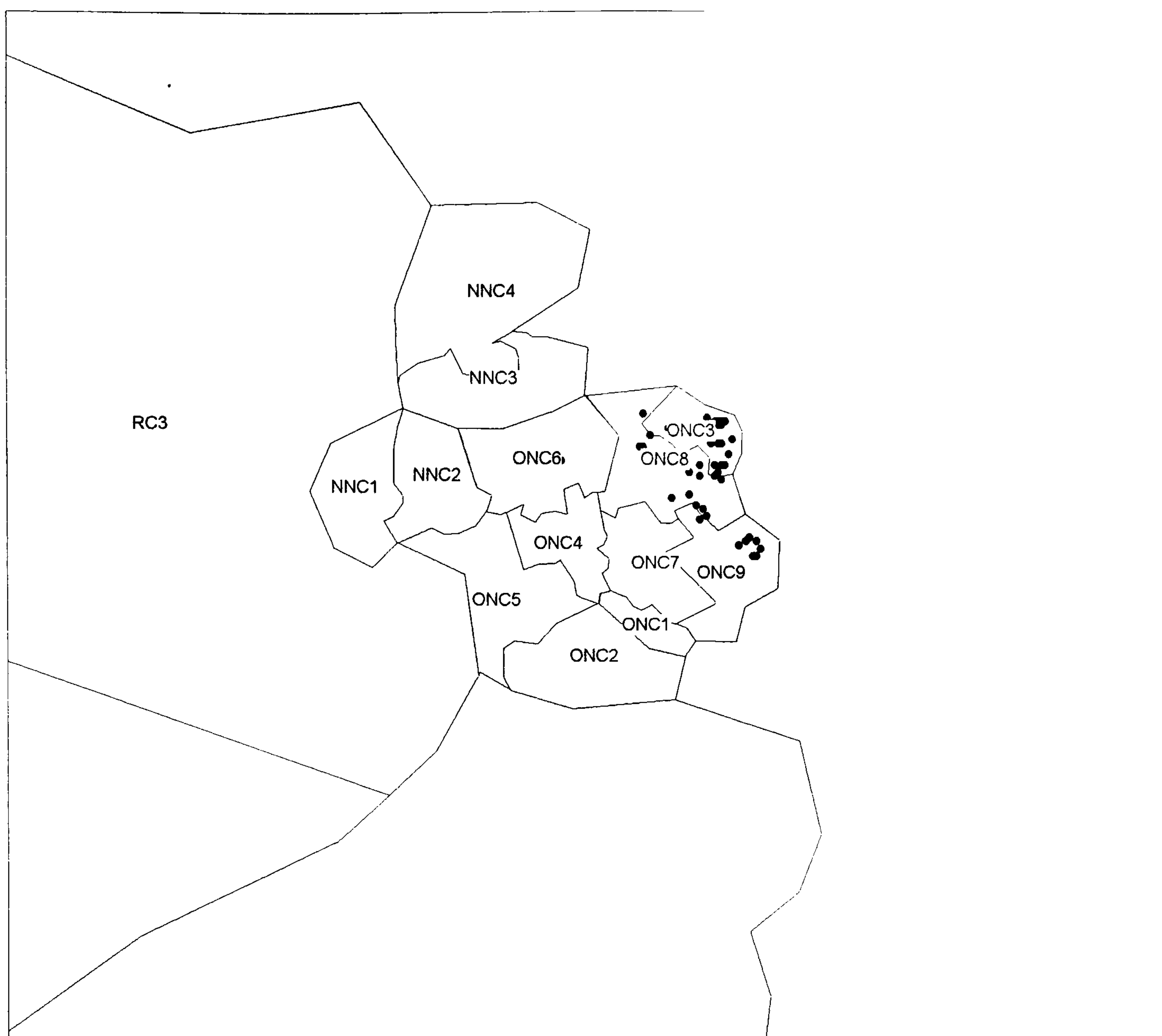
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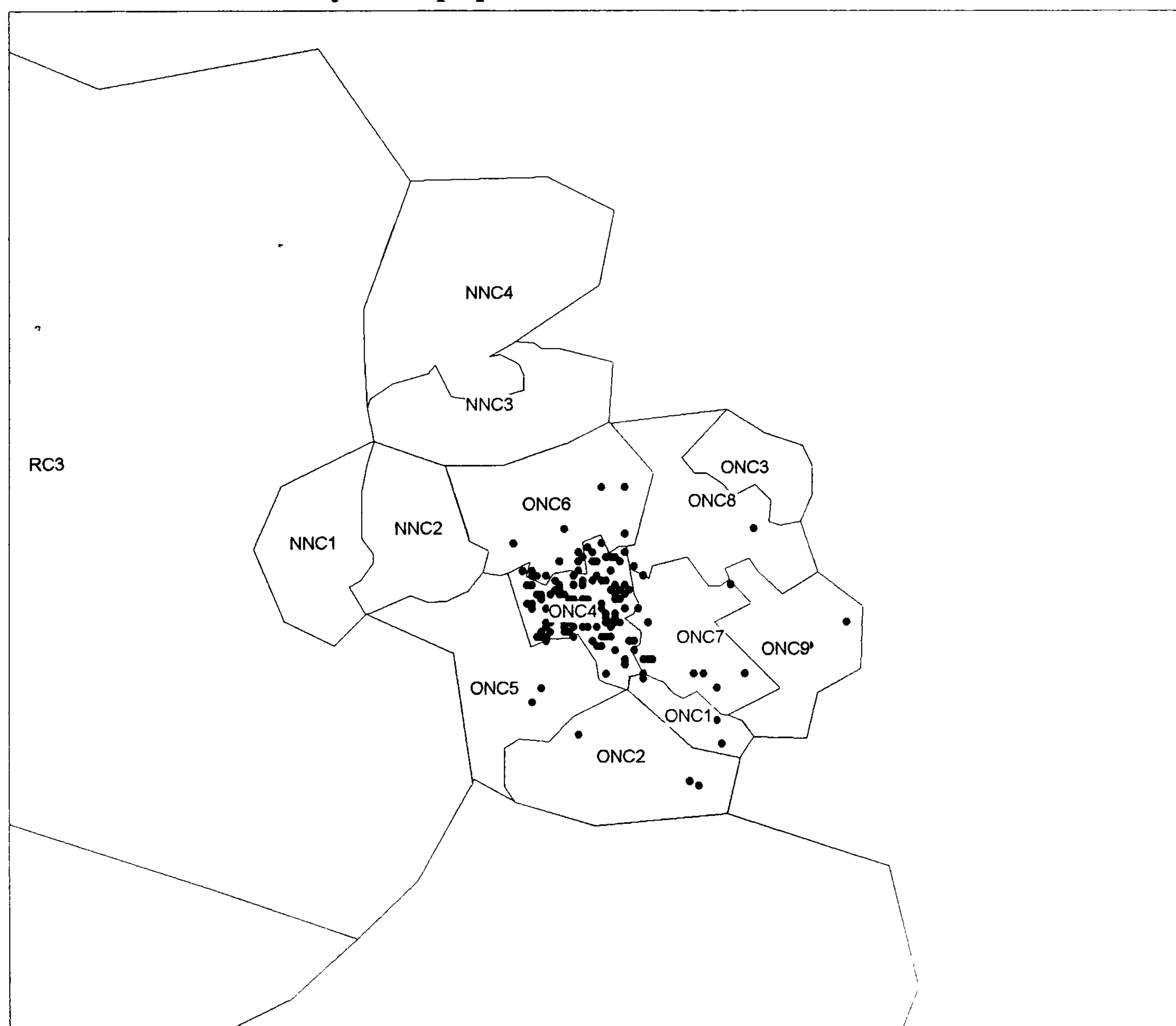
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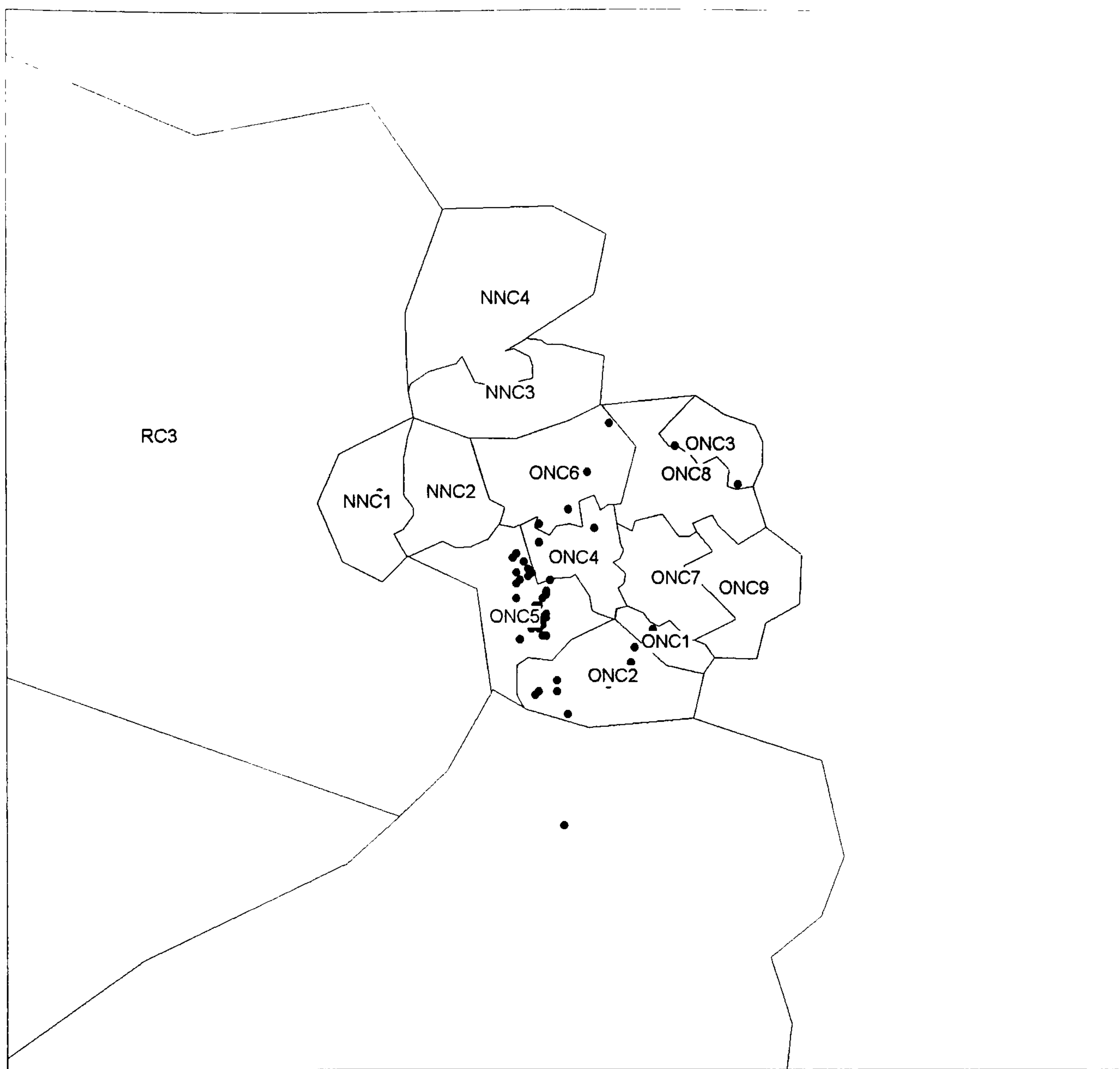
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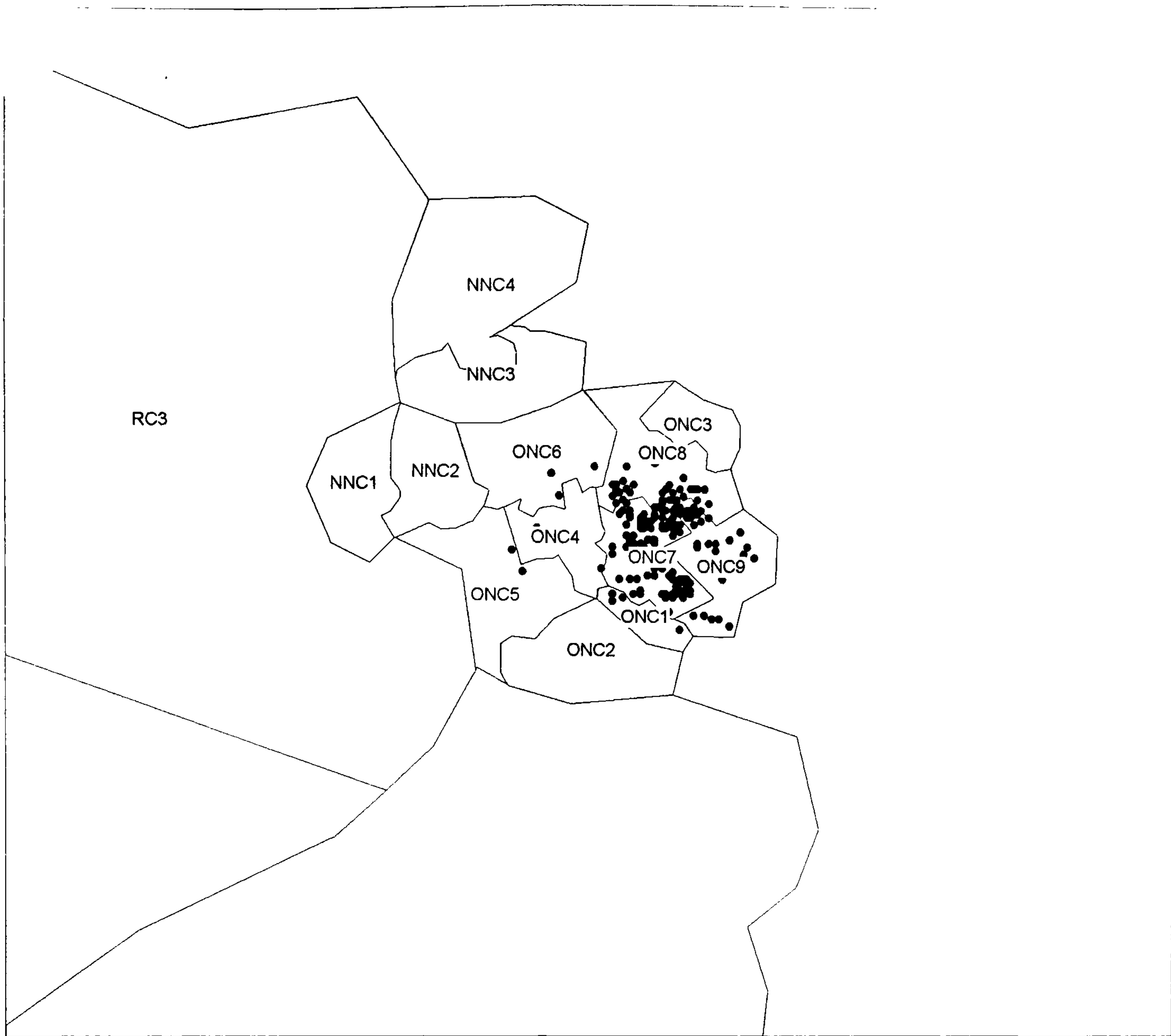
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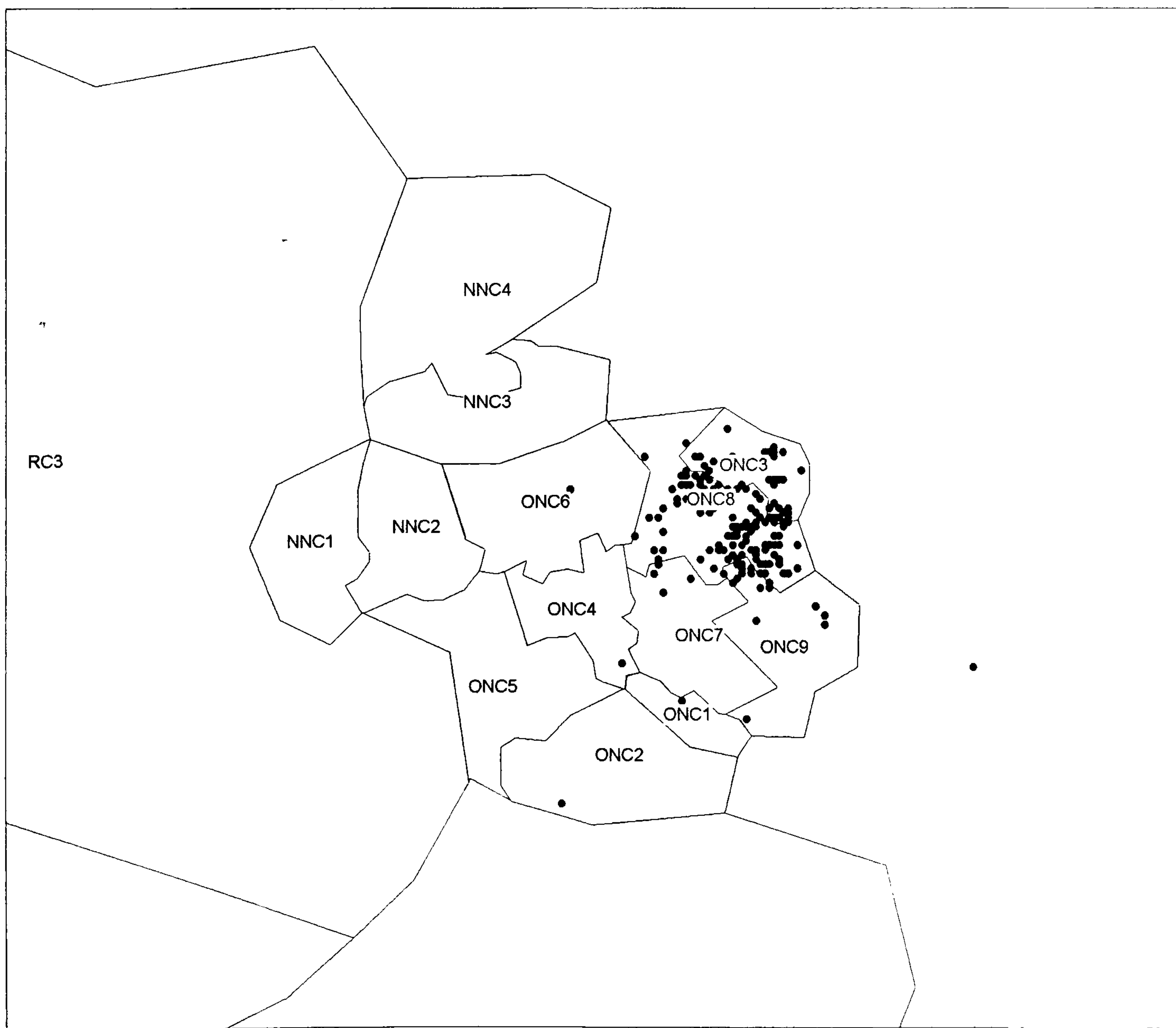
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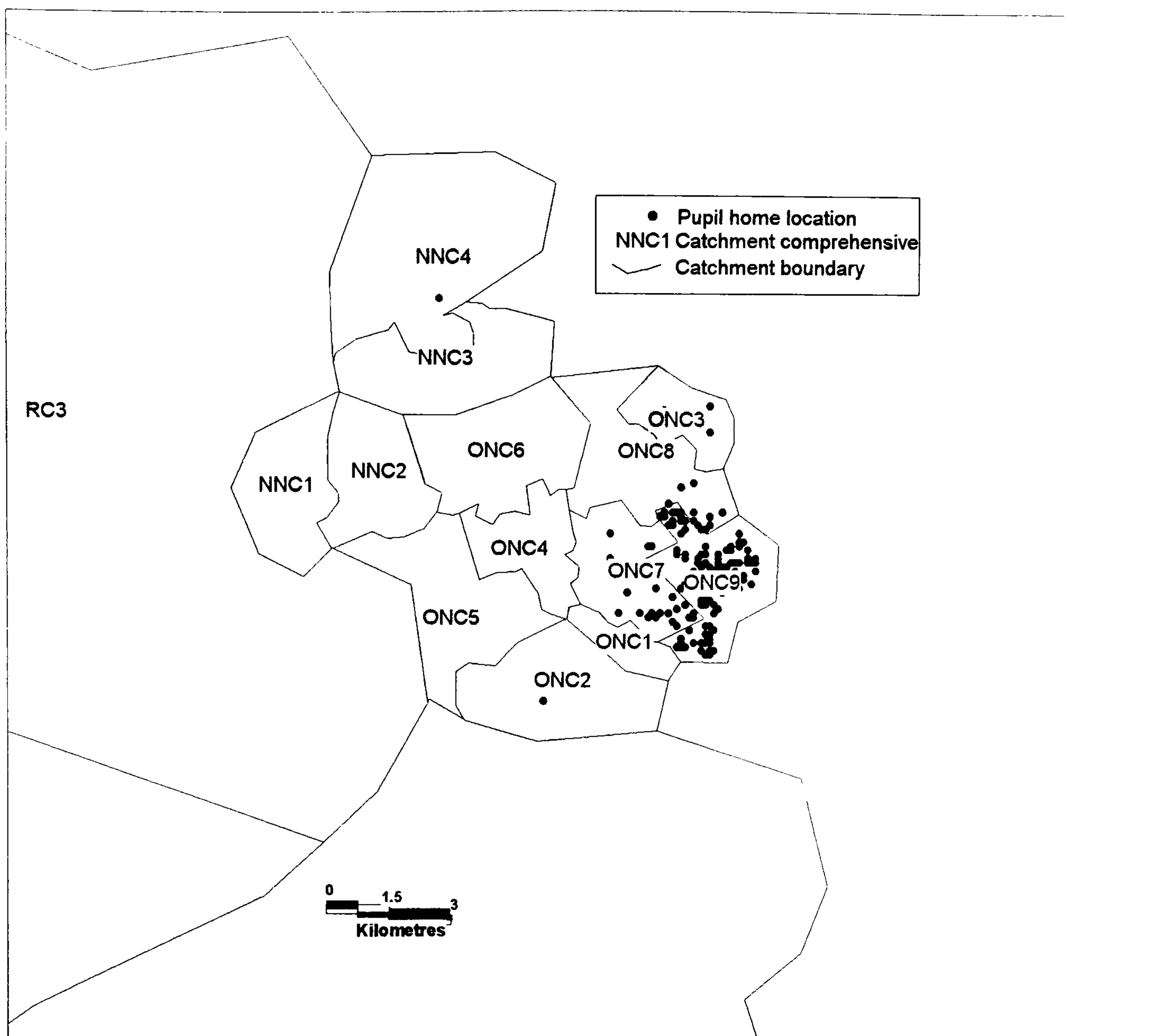
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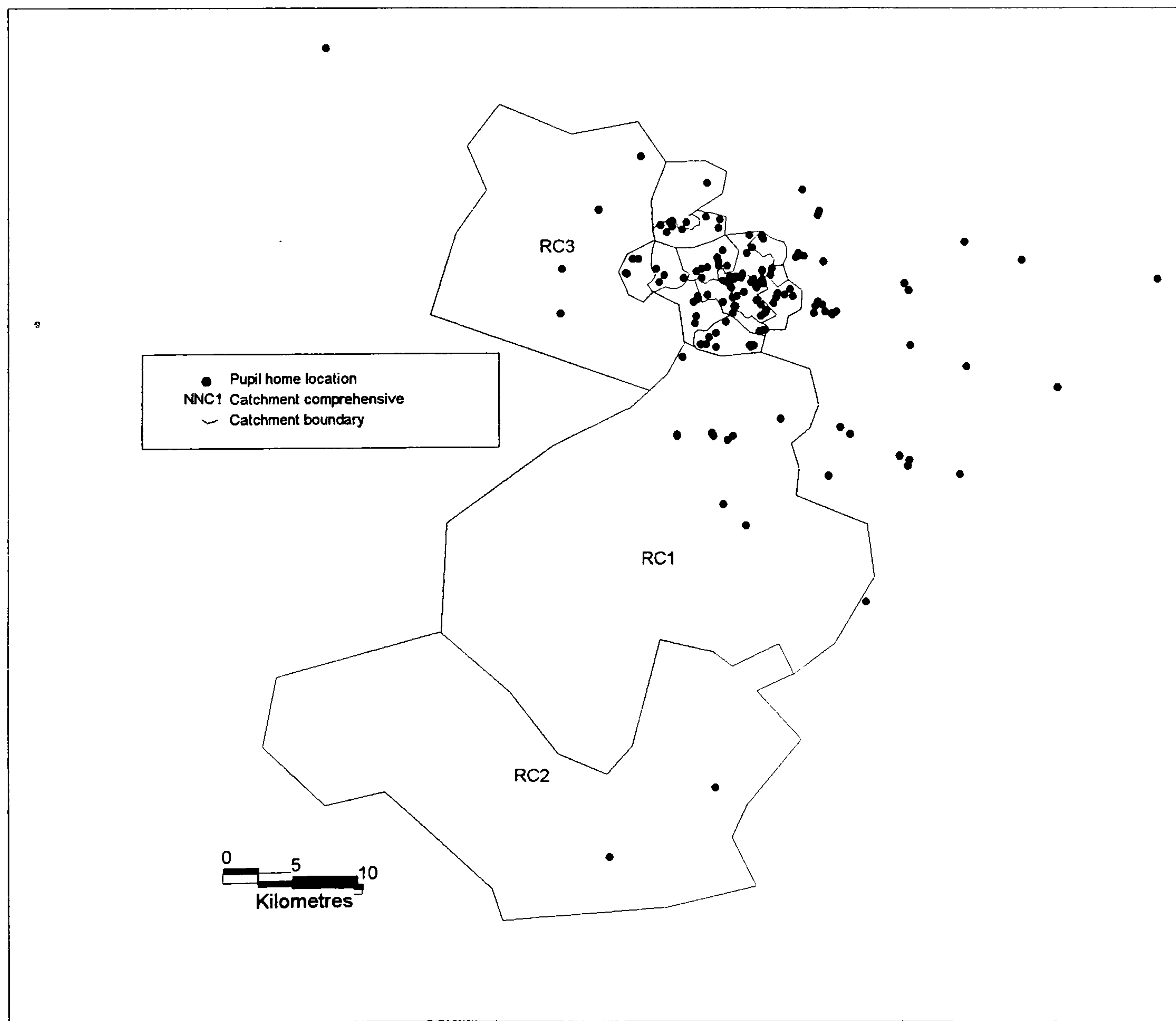
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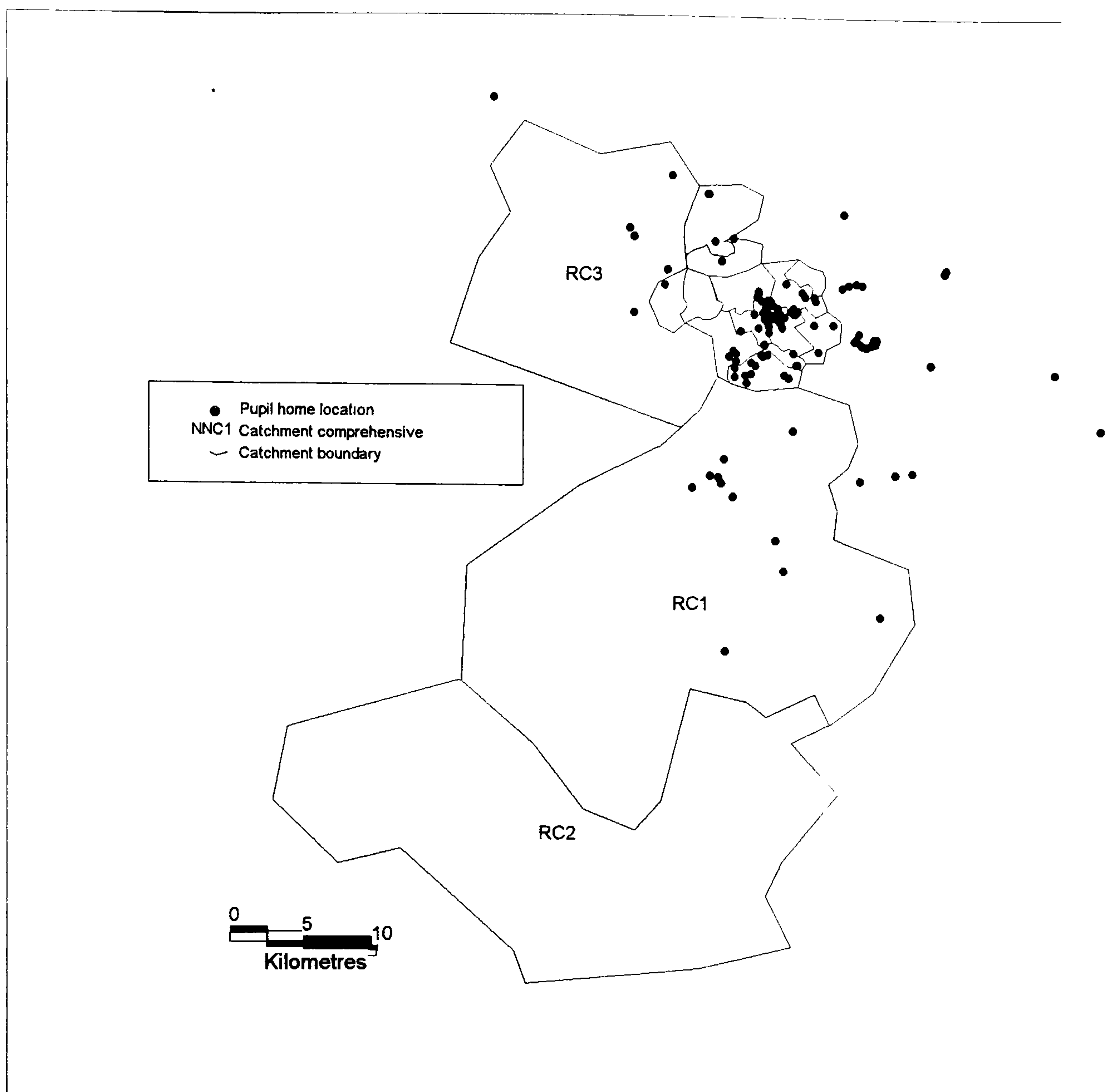
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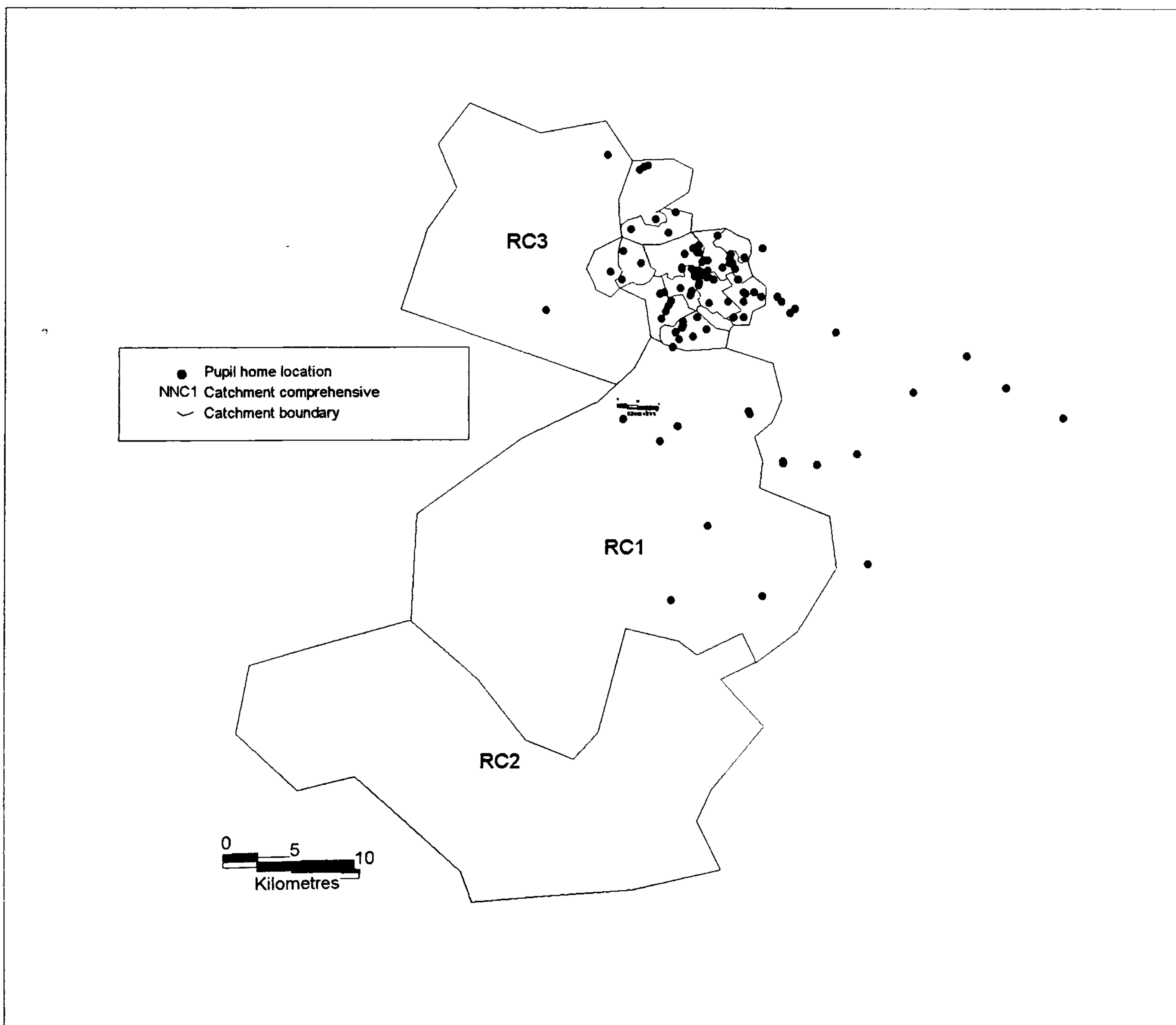
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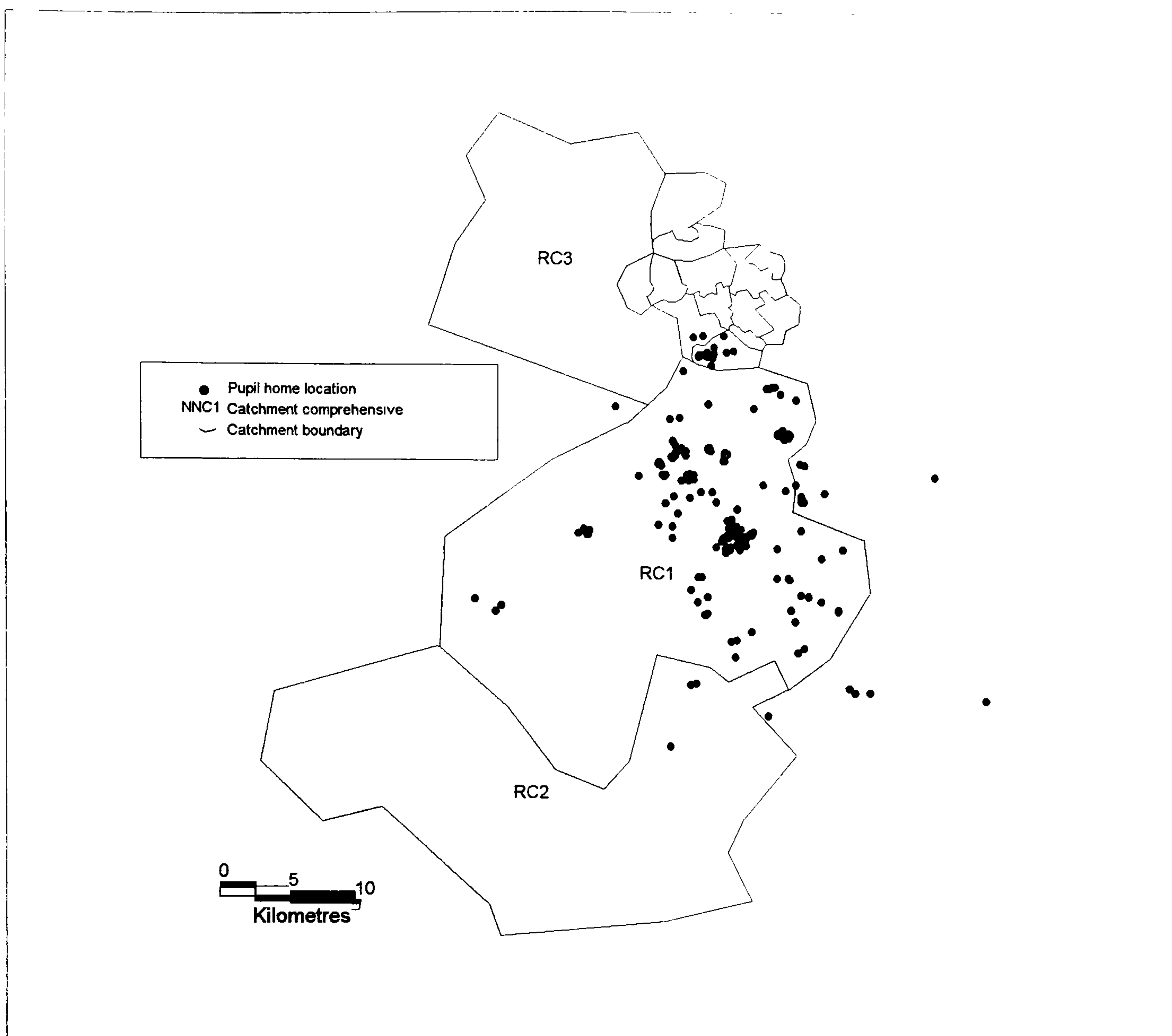
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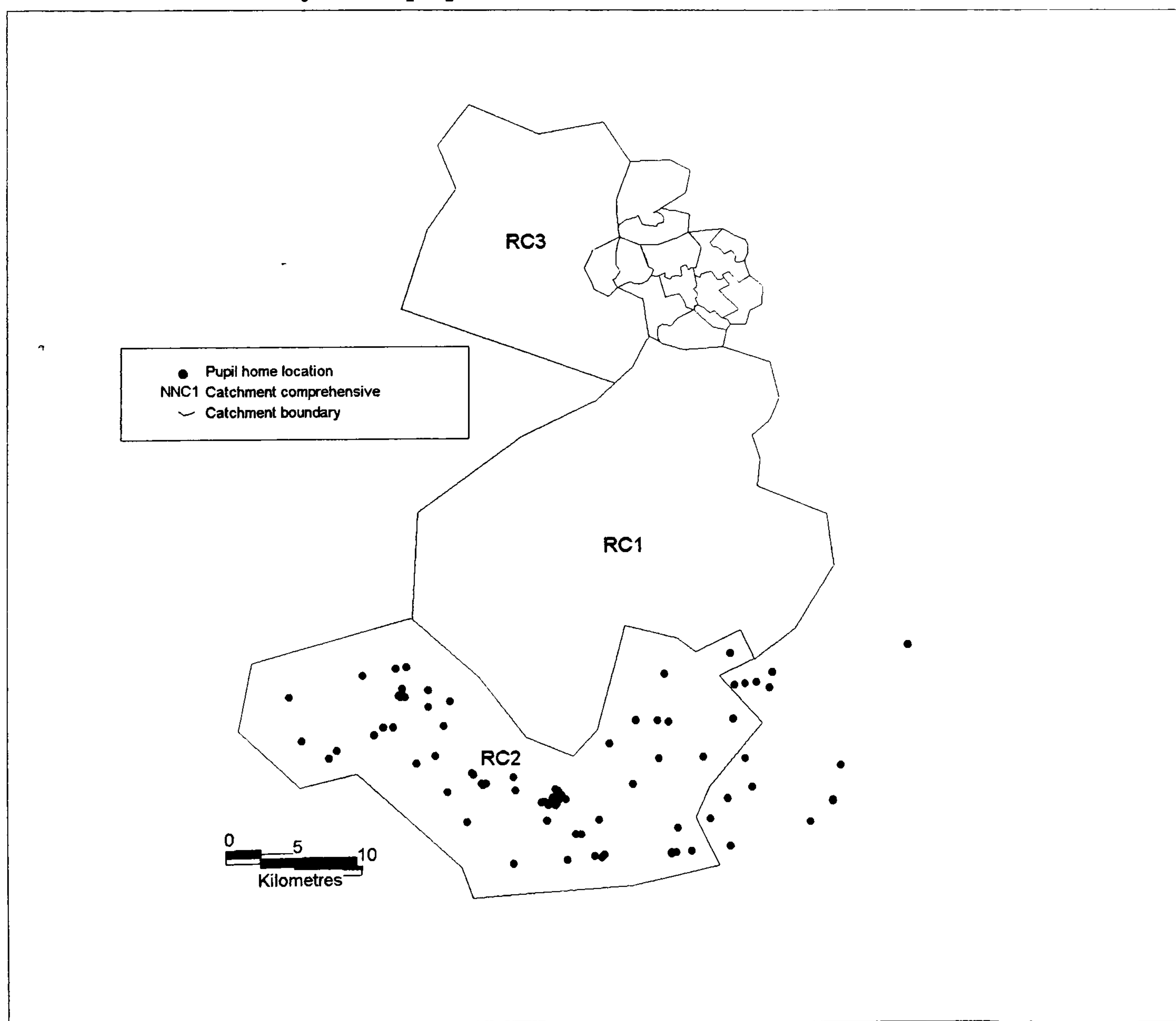
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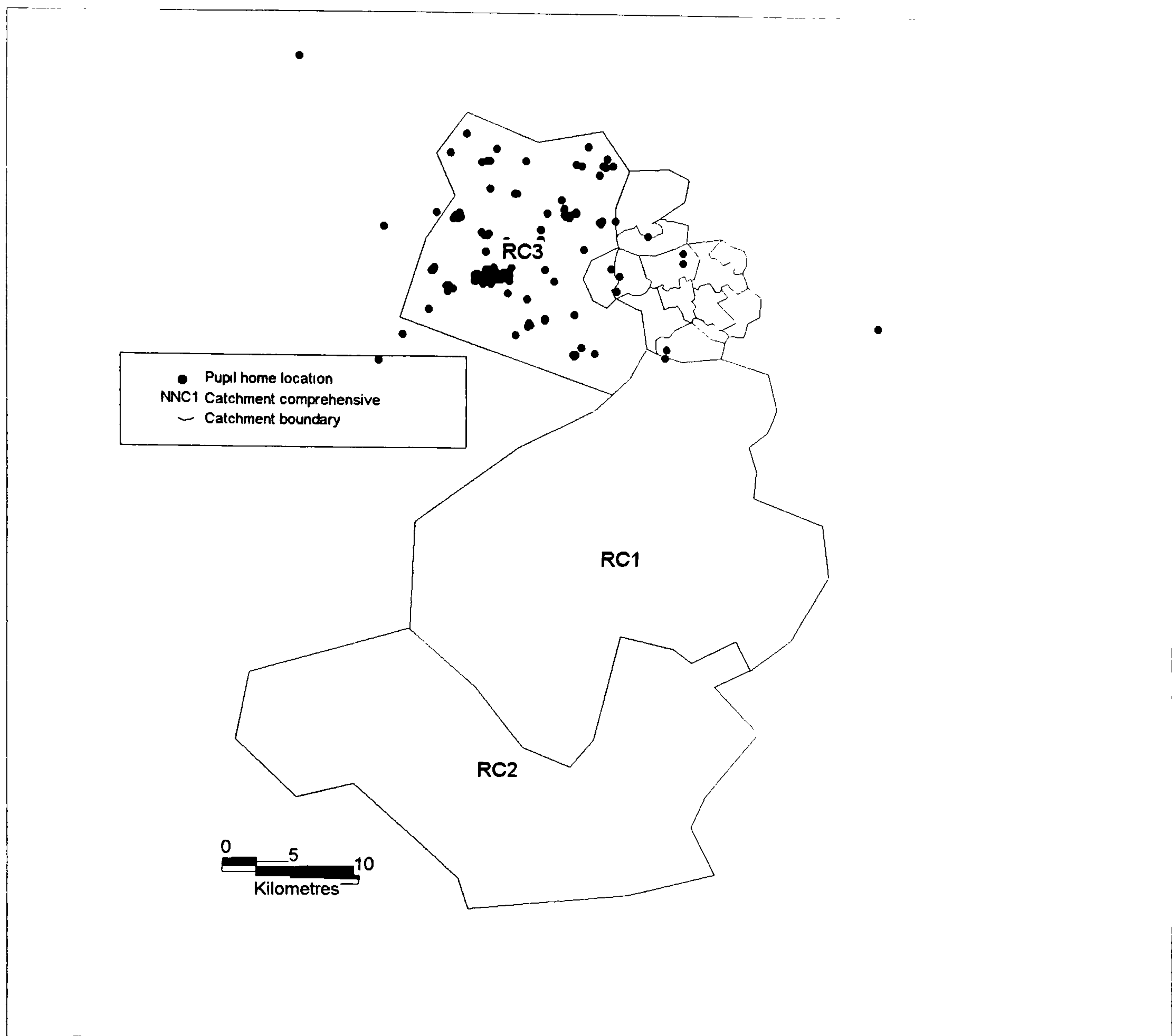
G3 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



RC1 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995

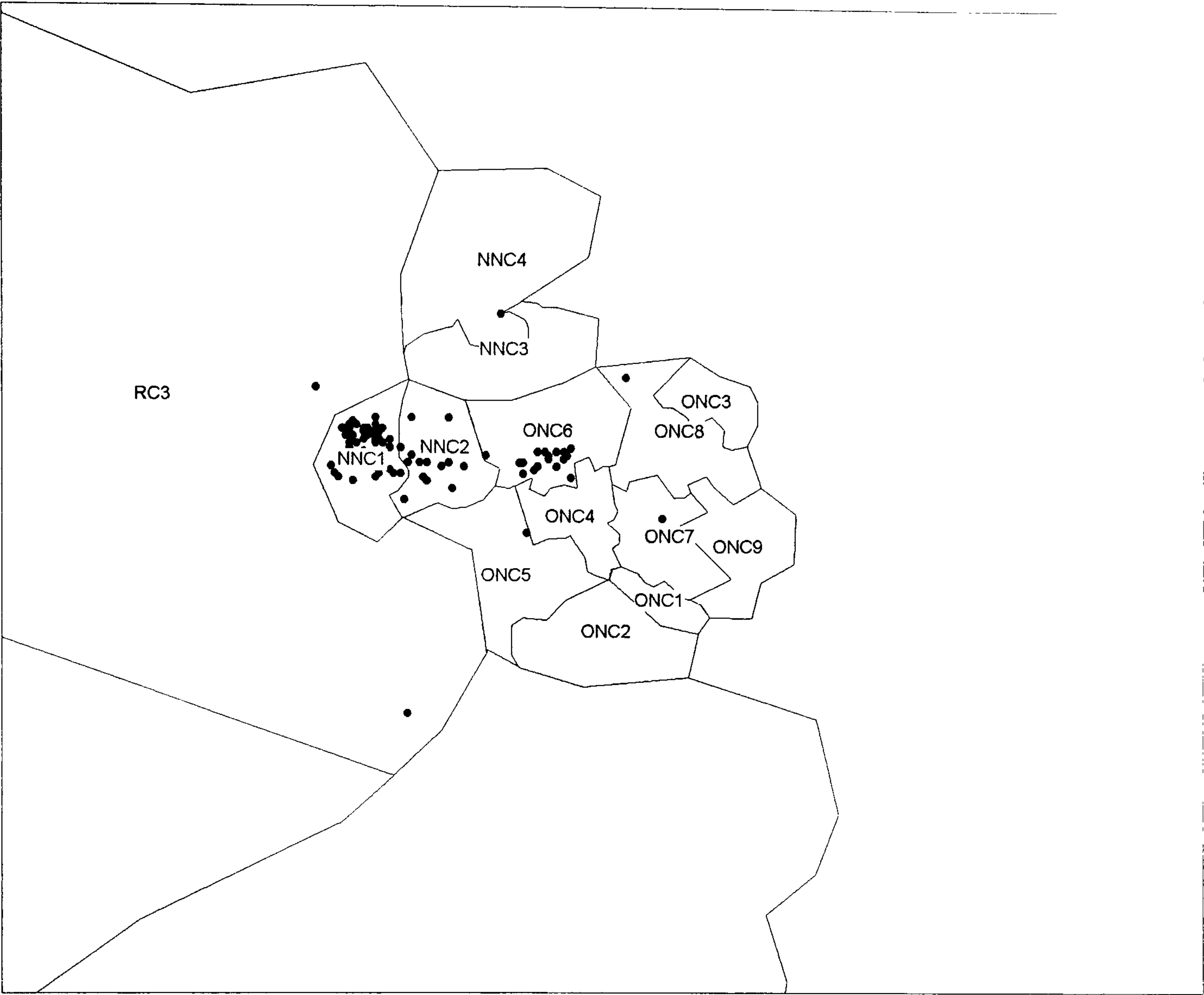


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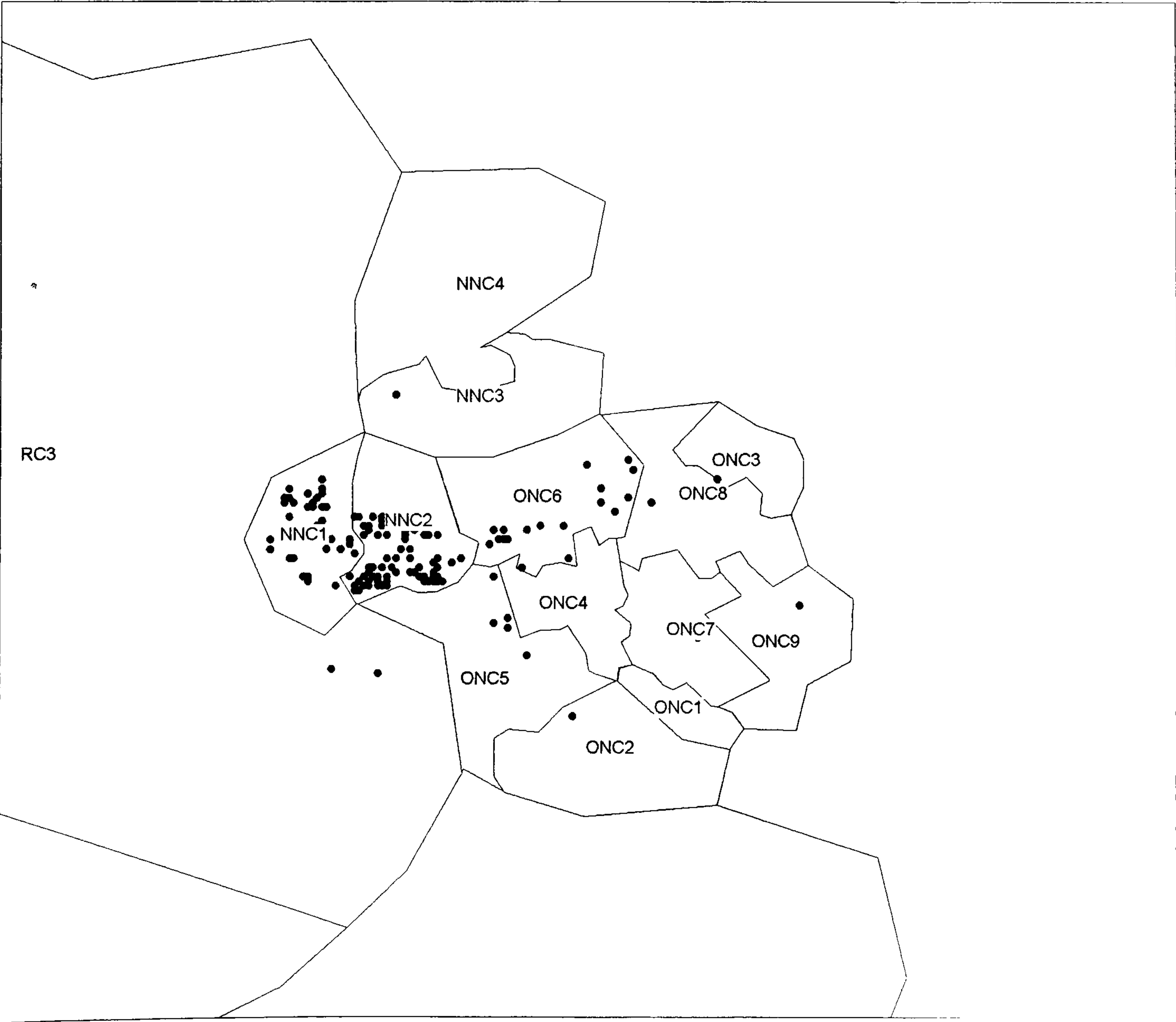


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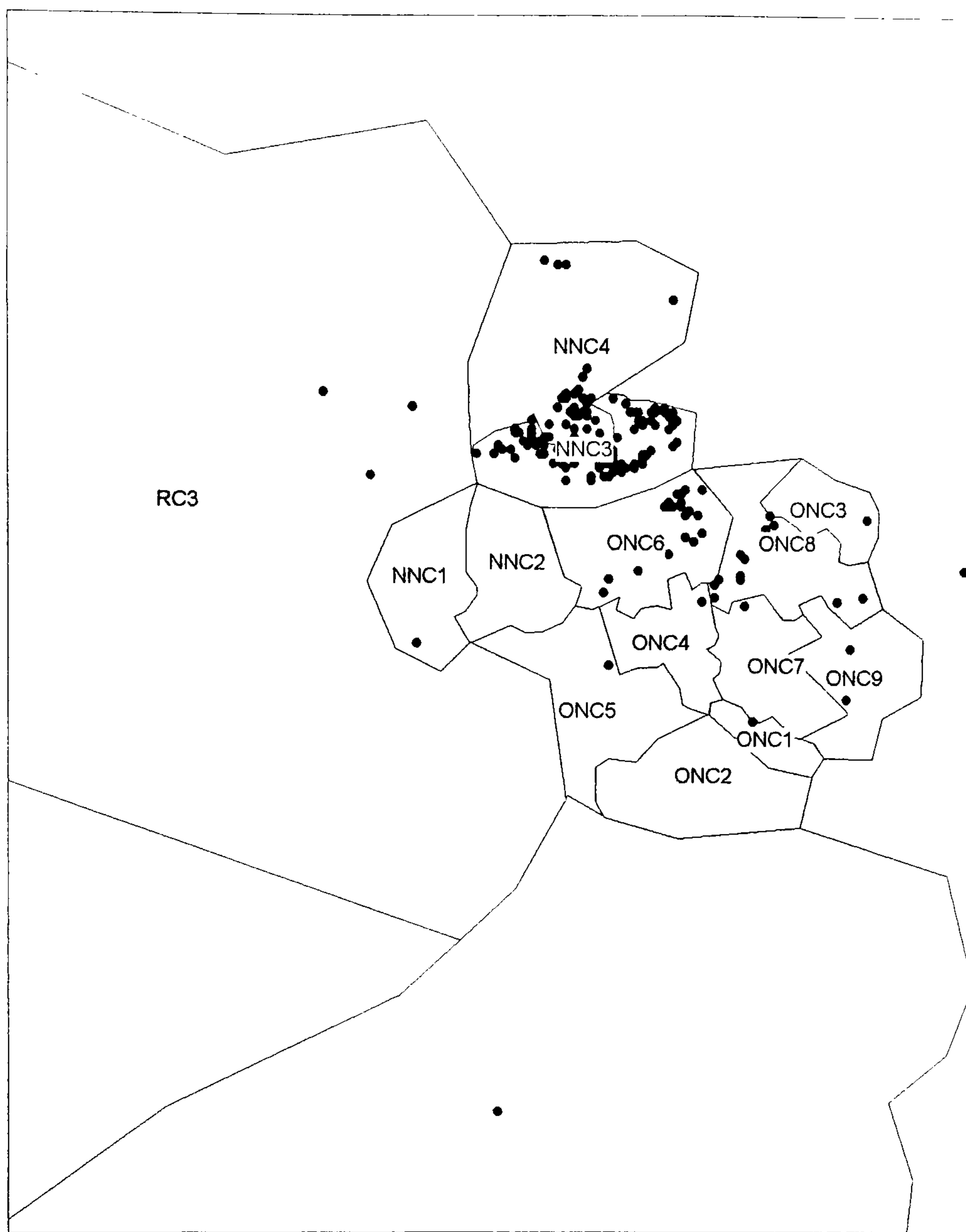
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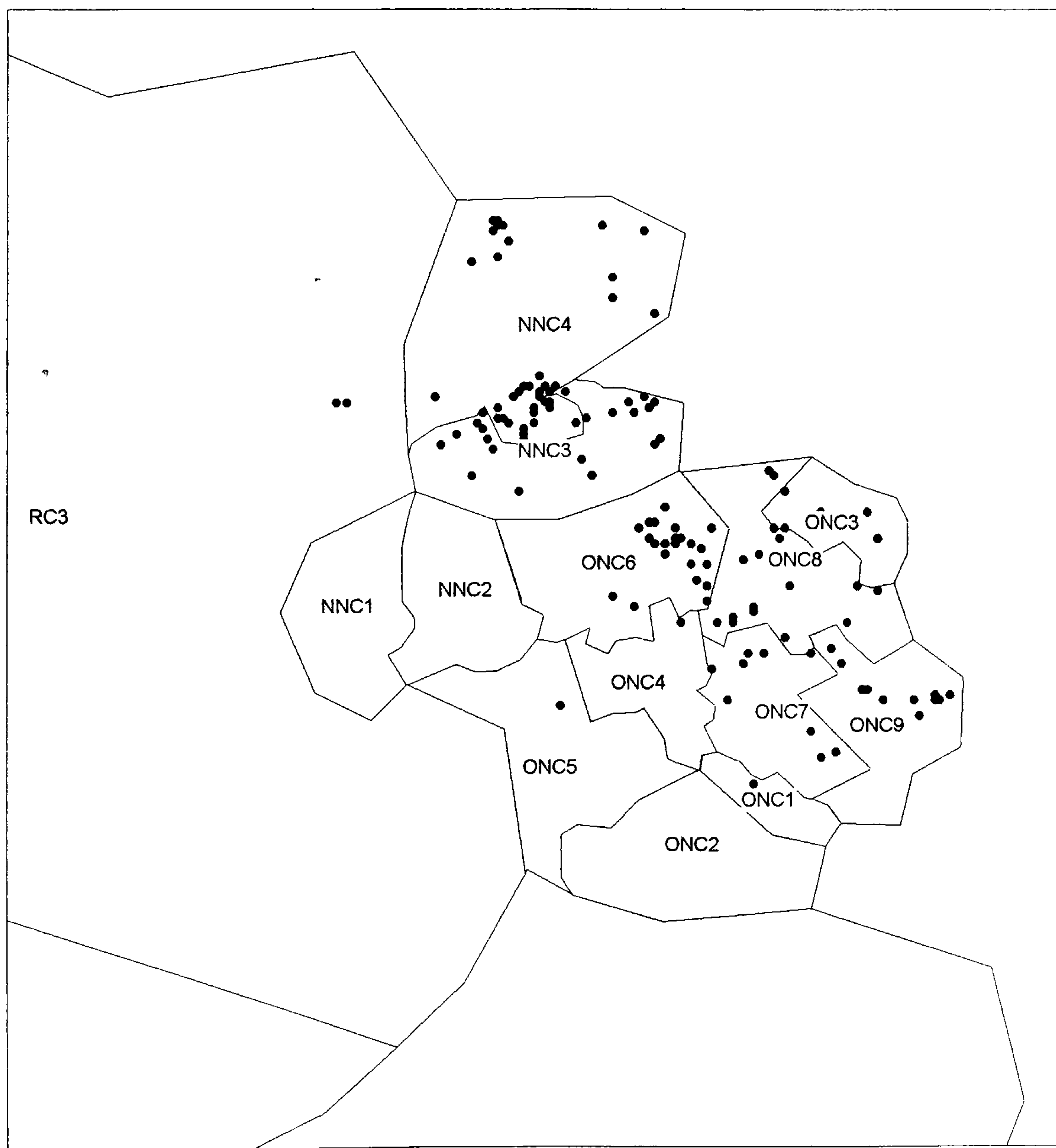
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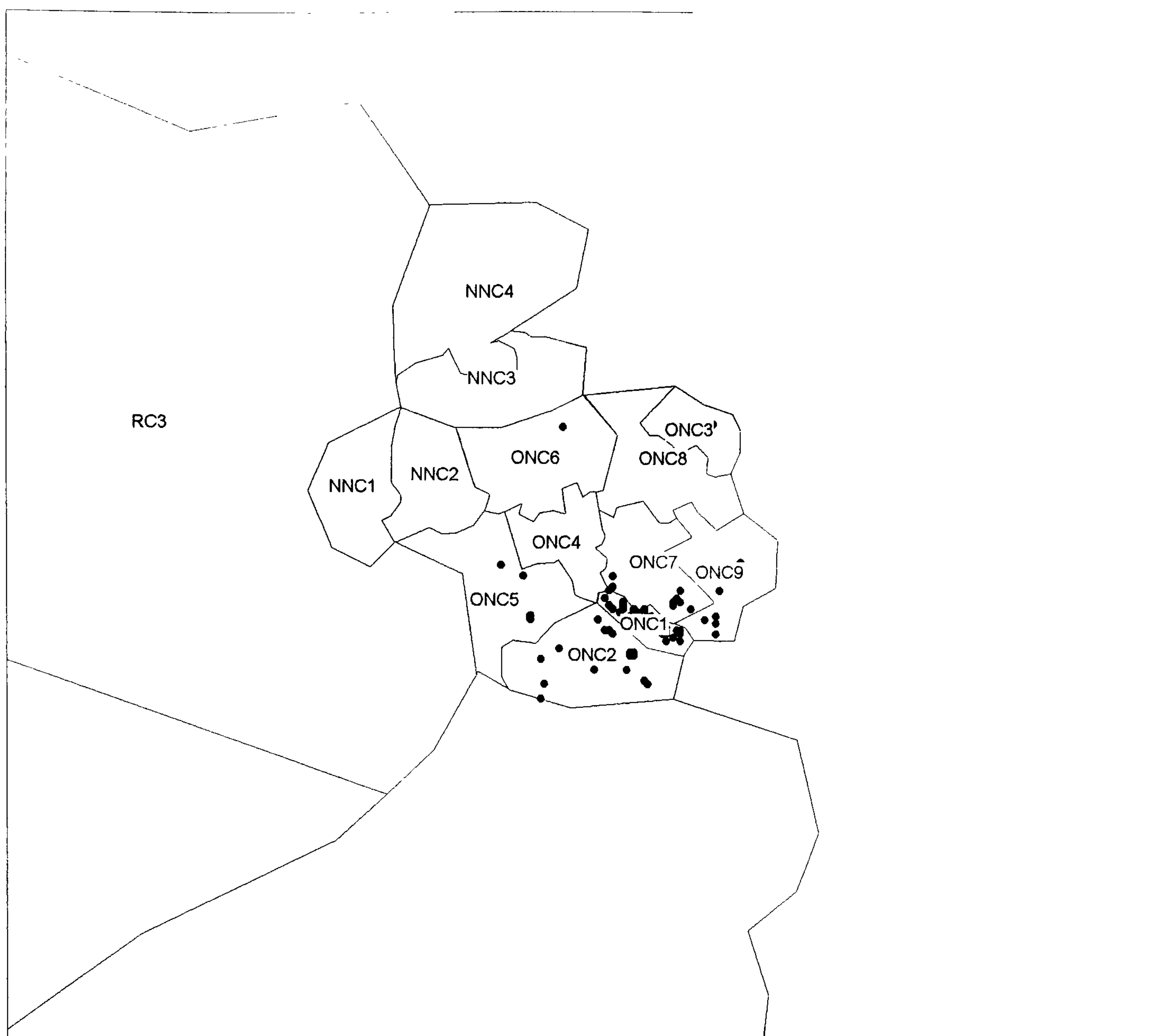
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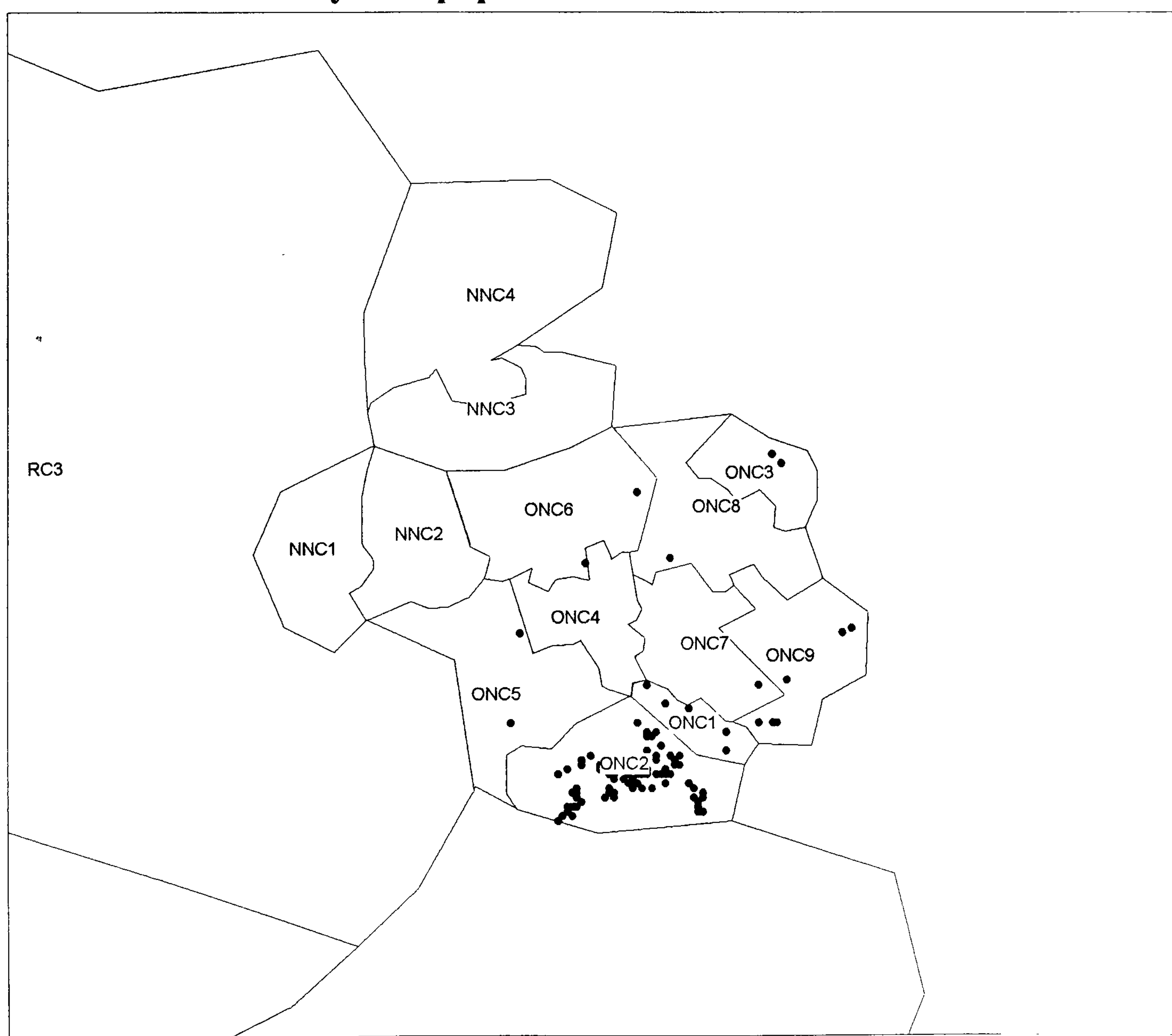
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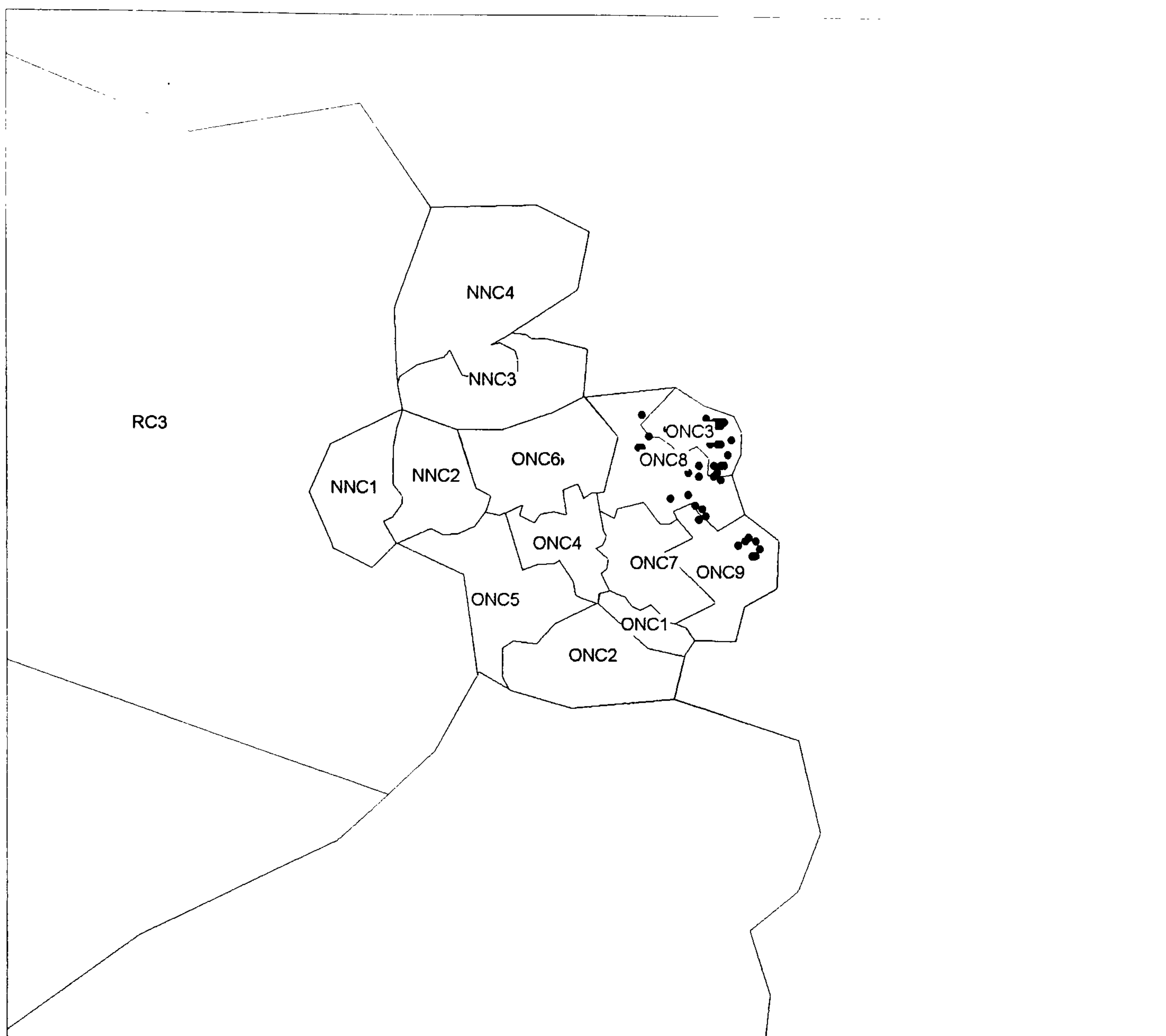
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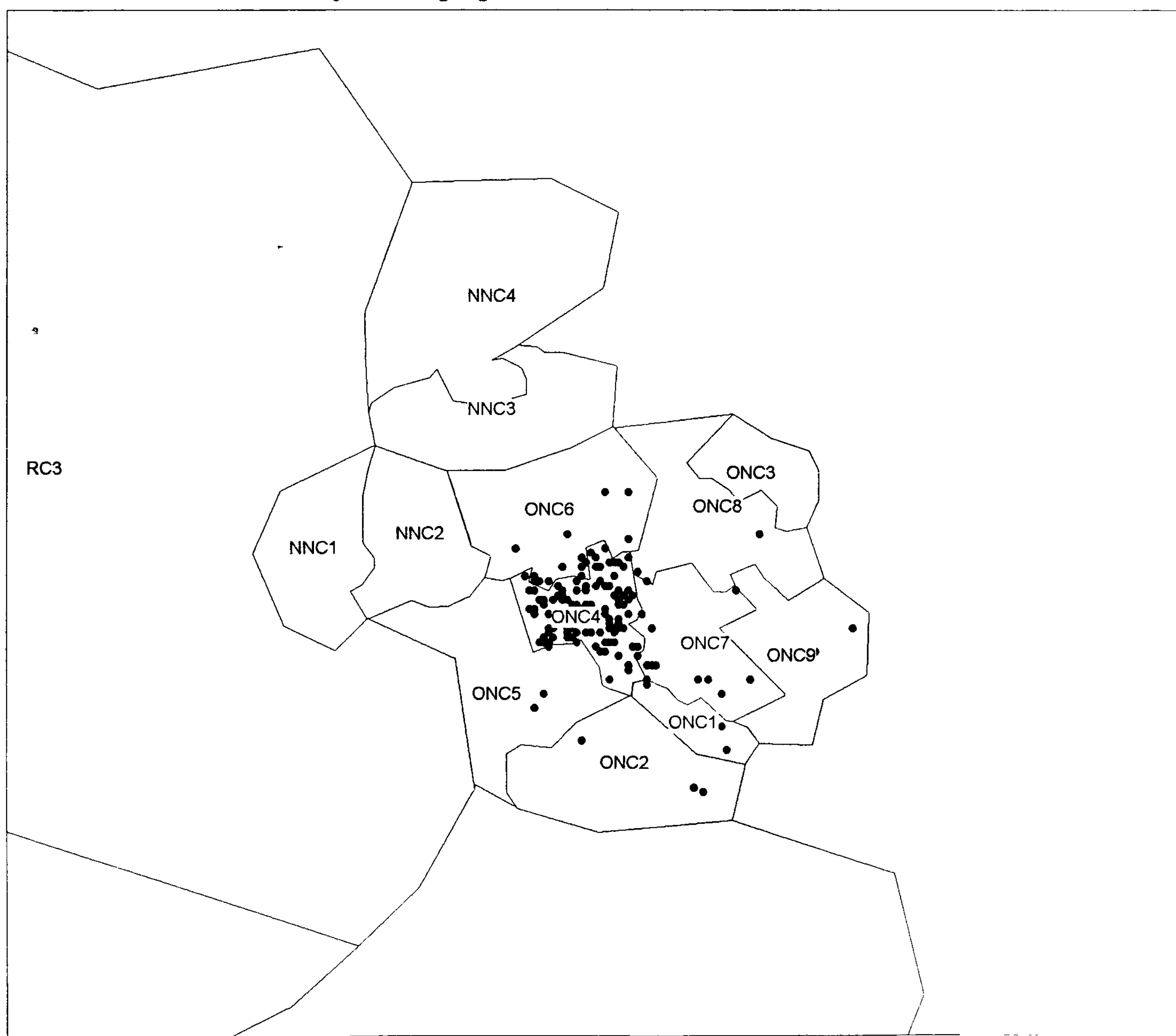
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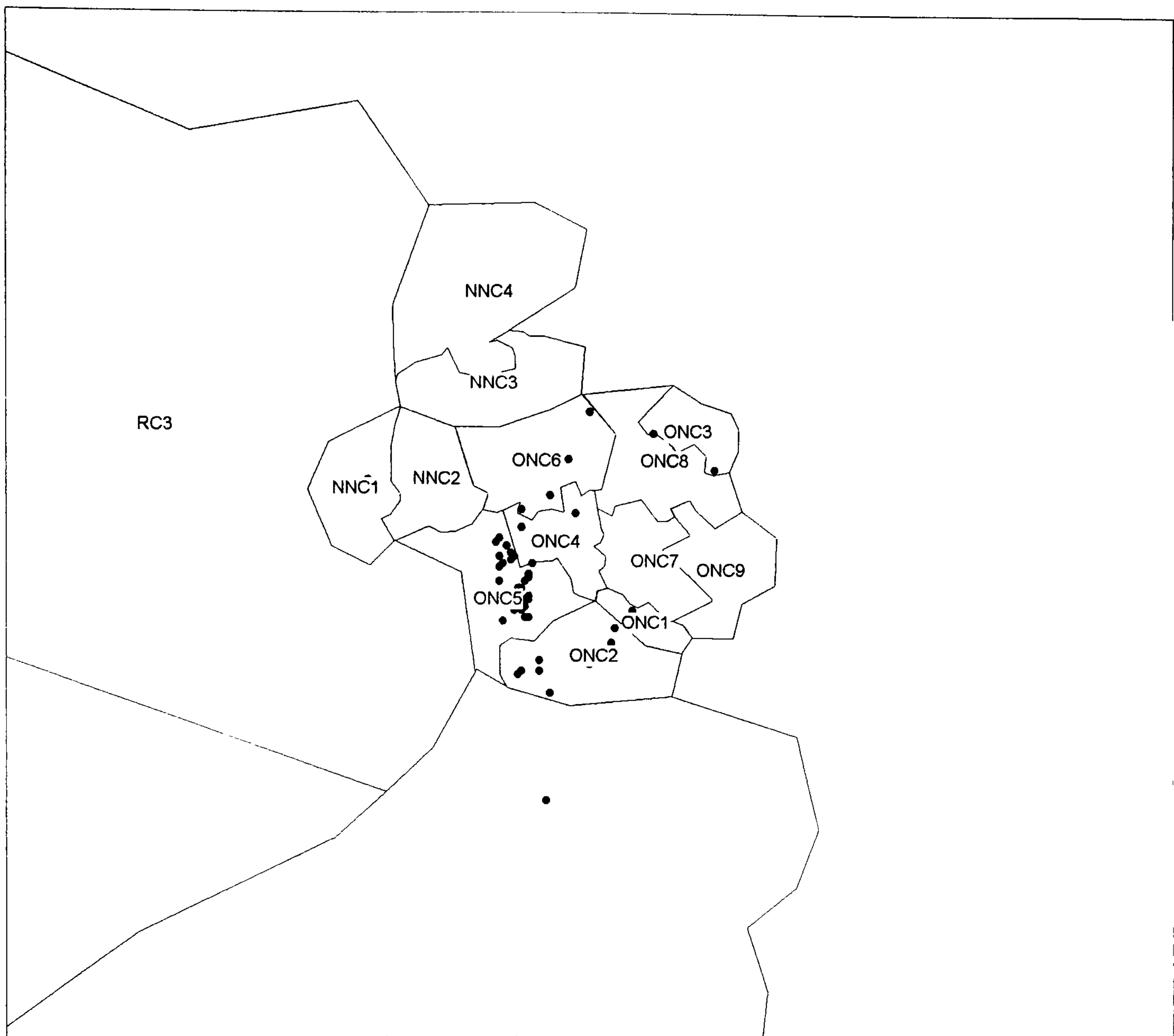
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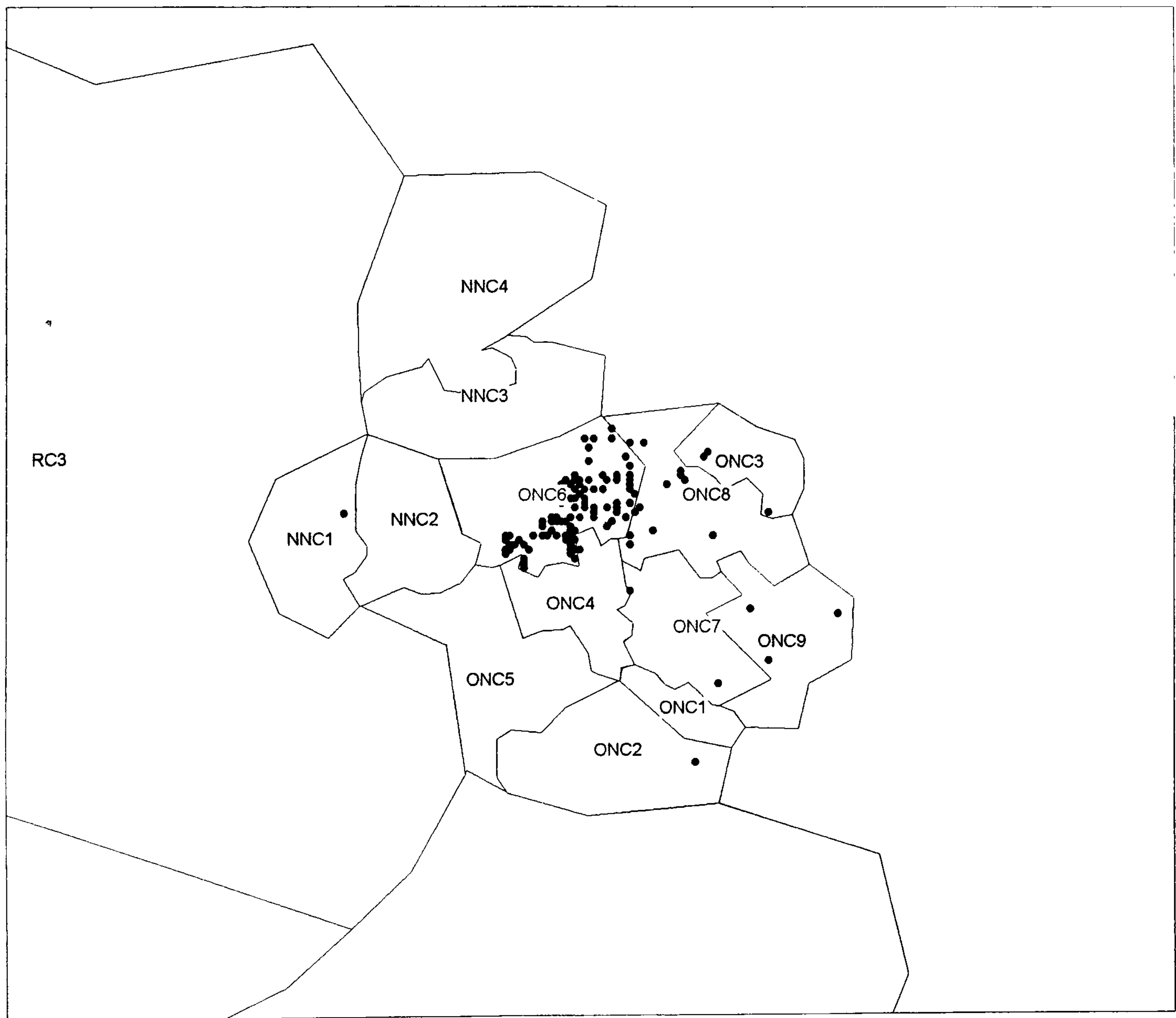
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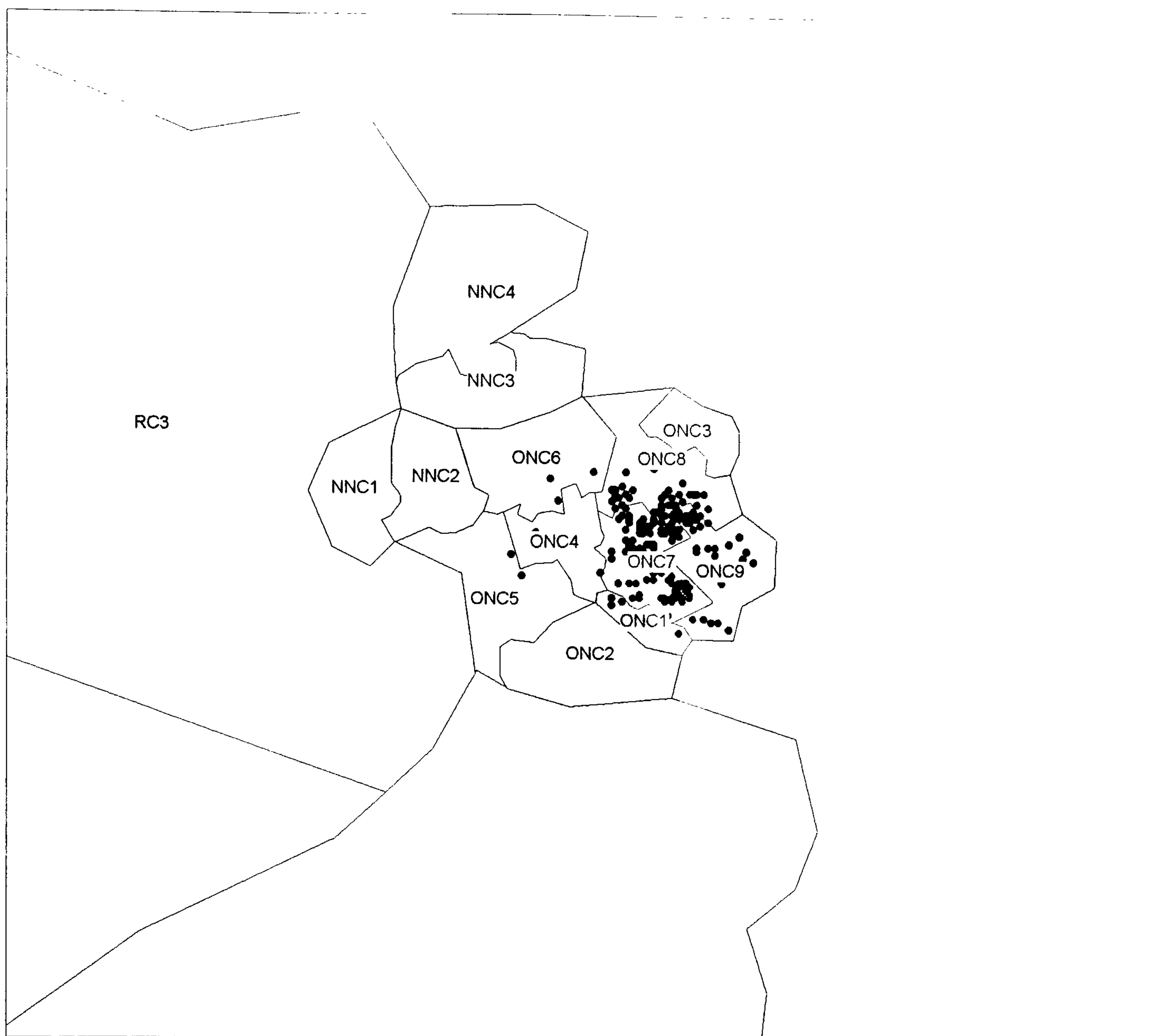
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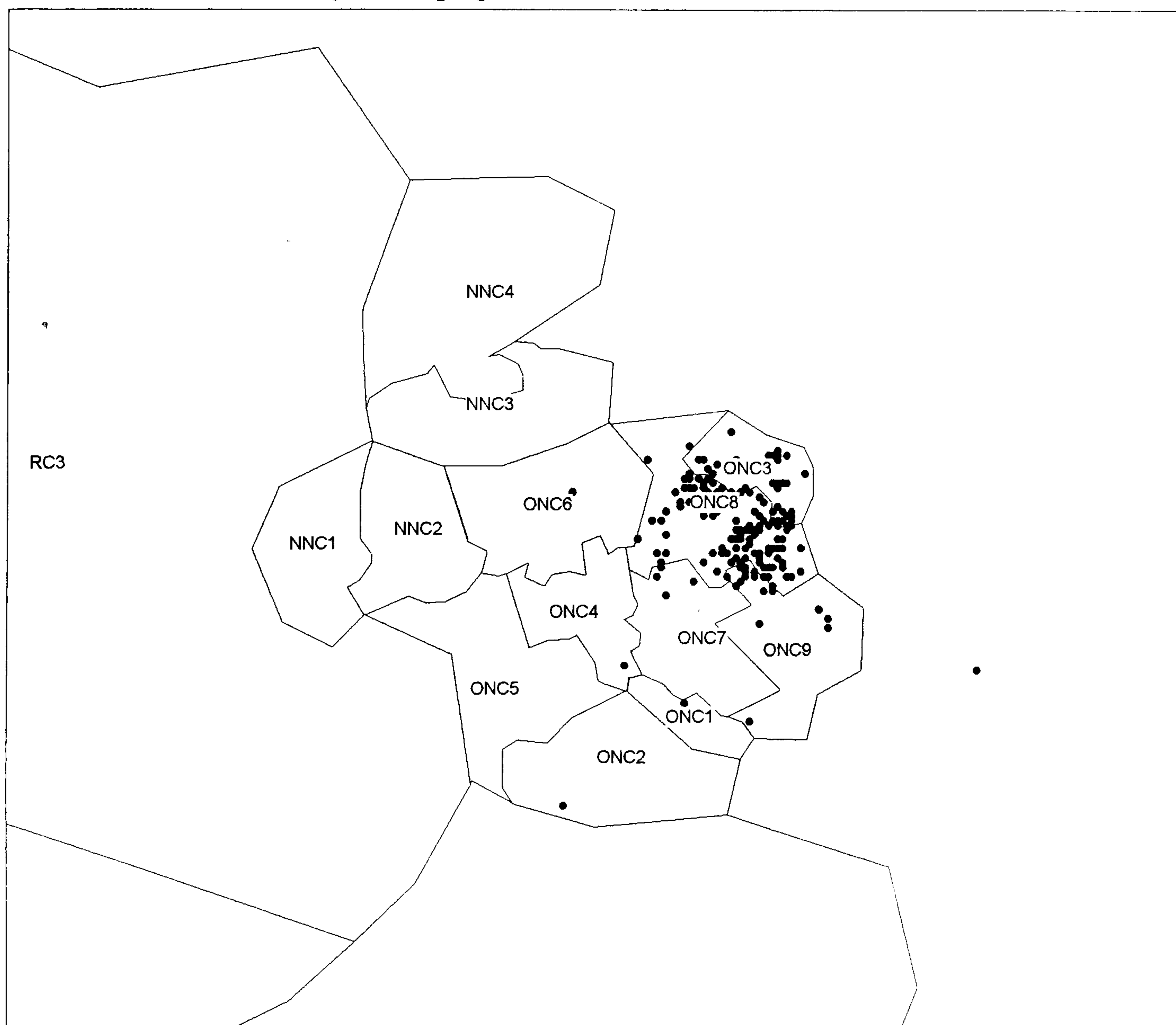
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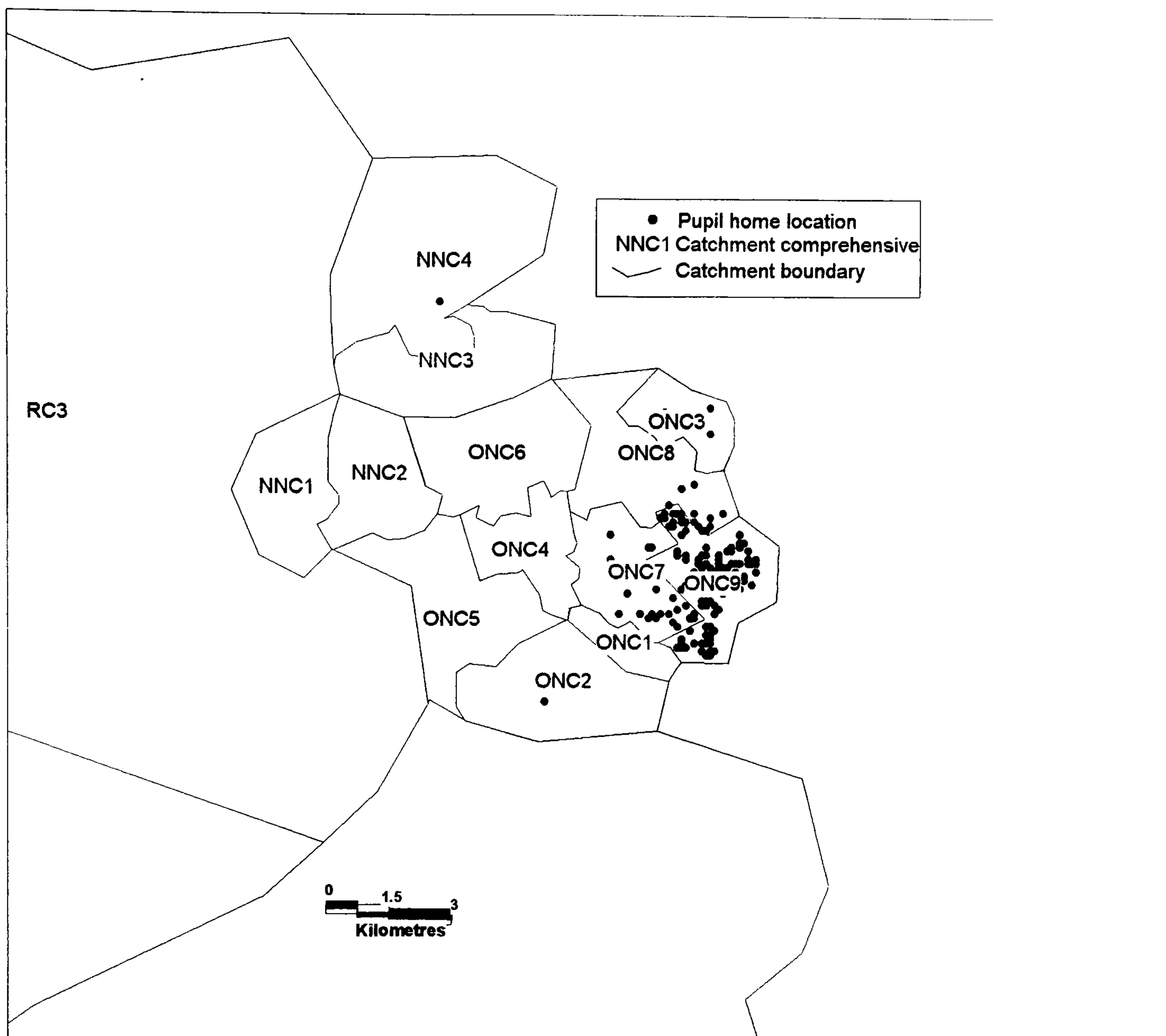
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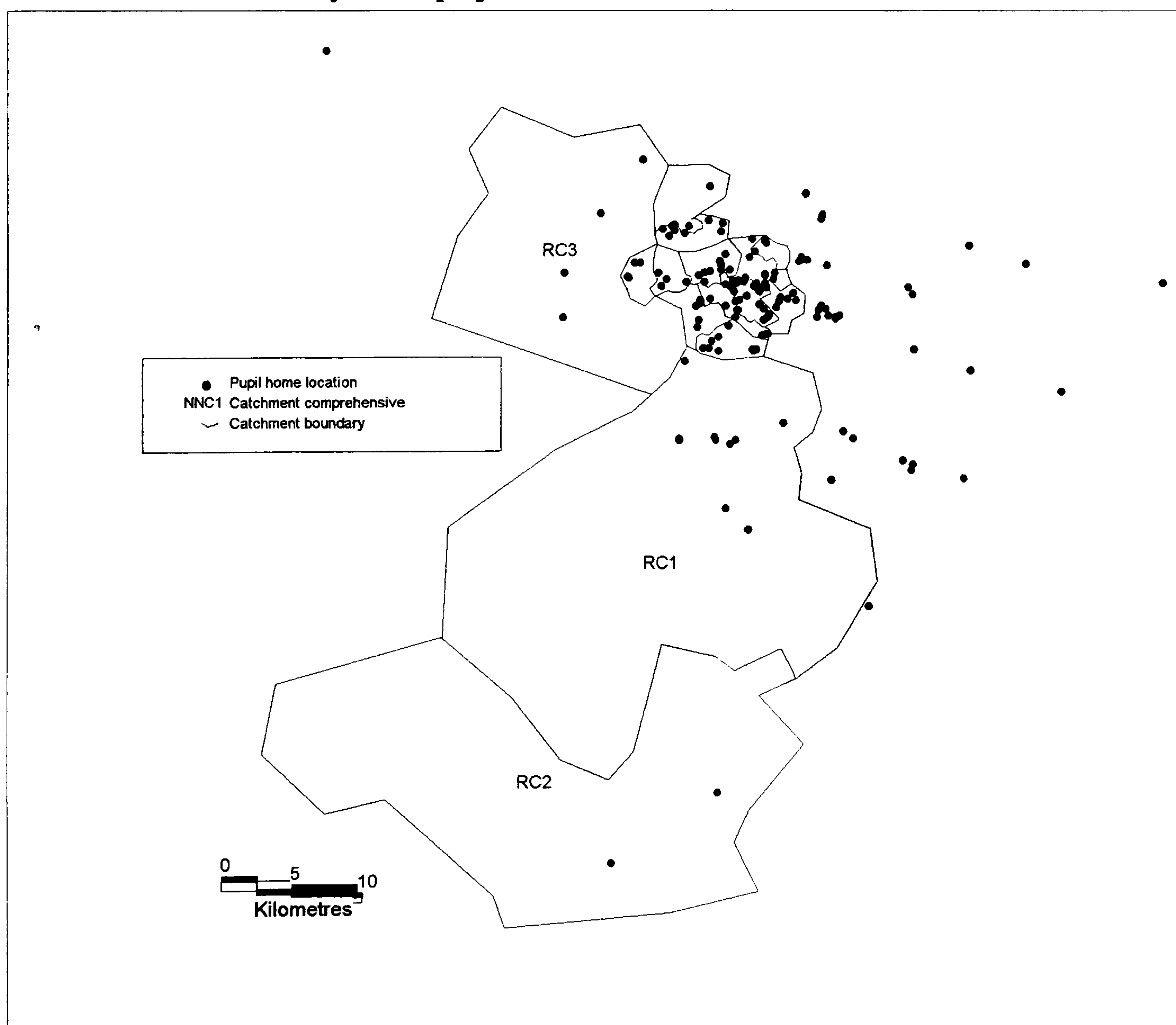
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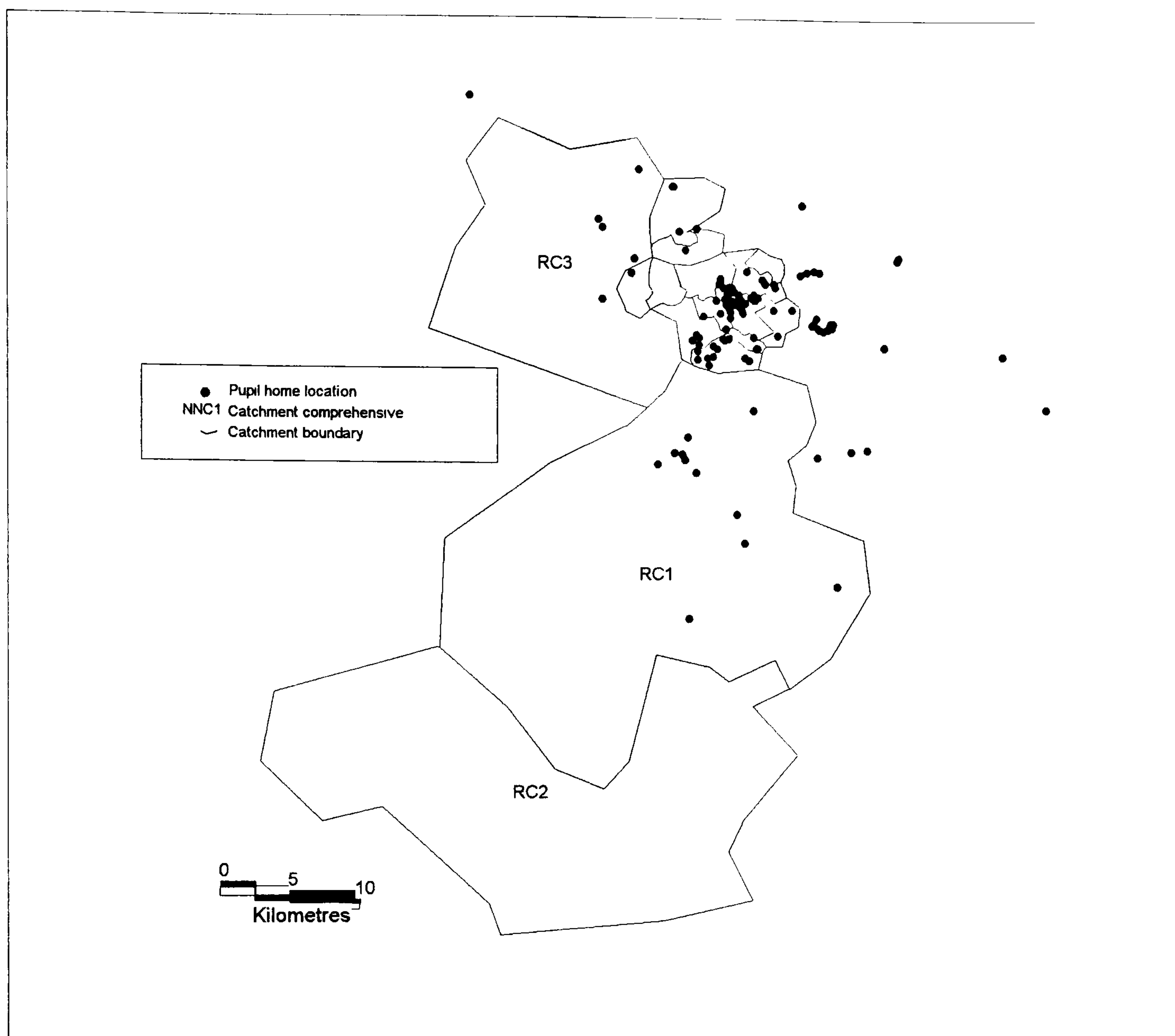
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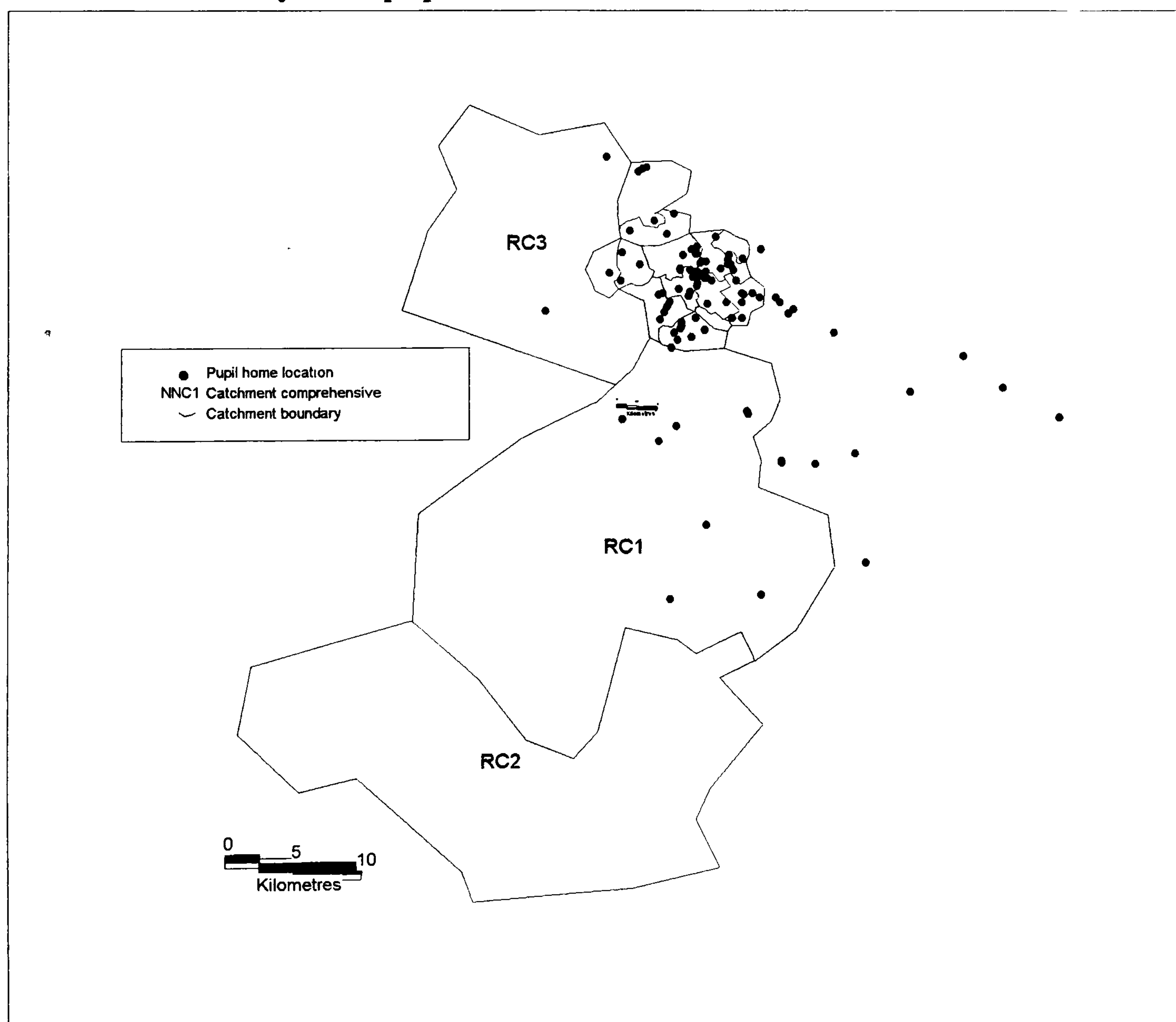
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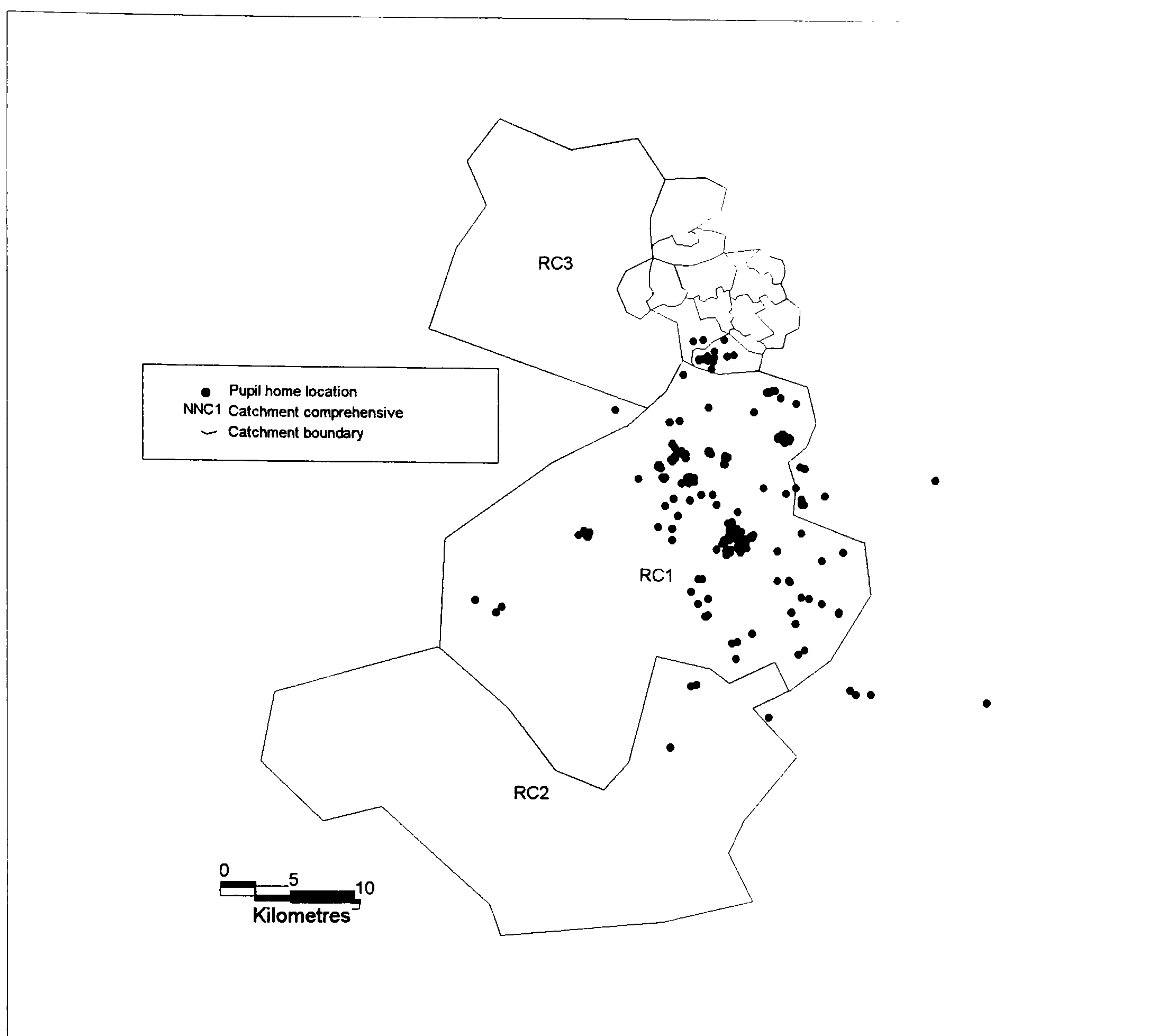
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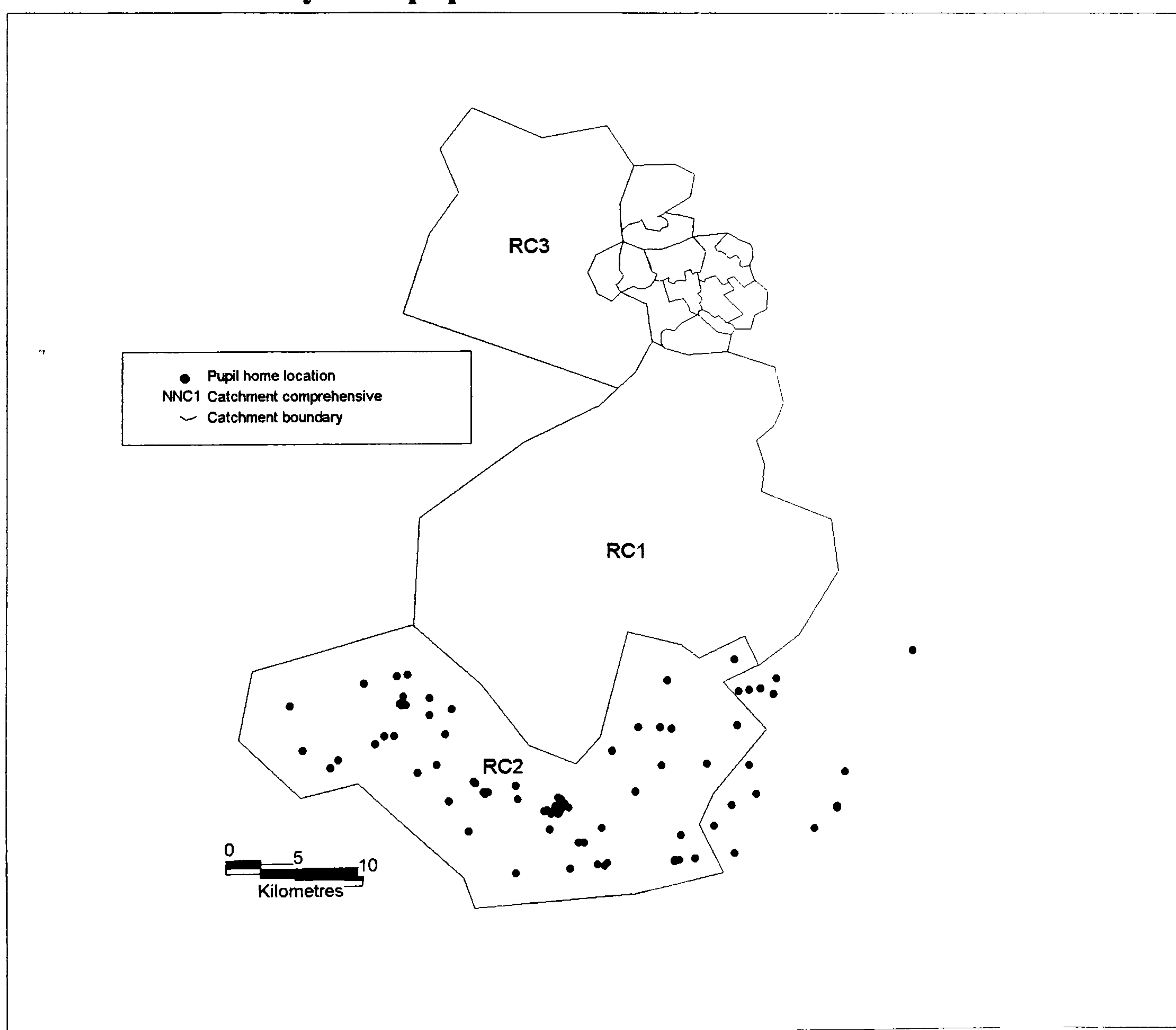
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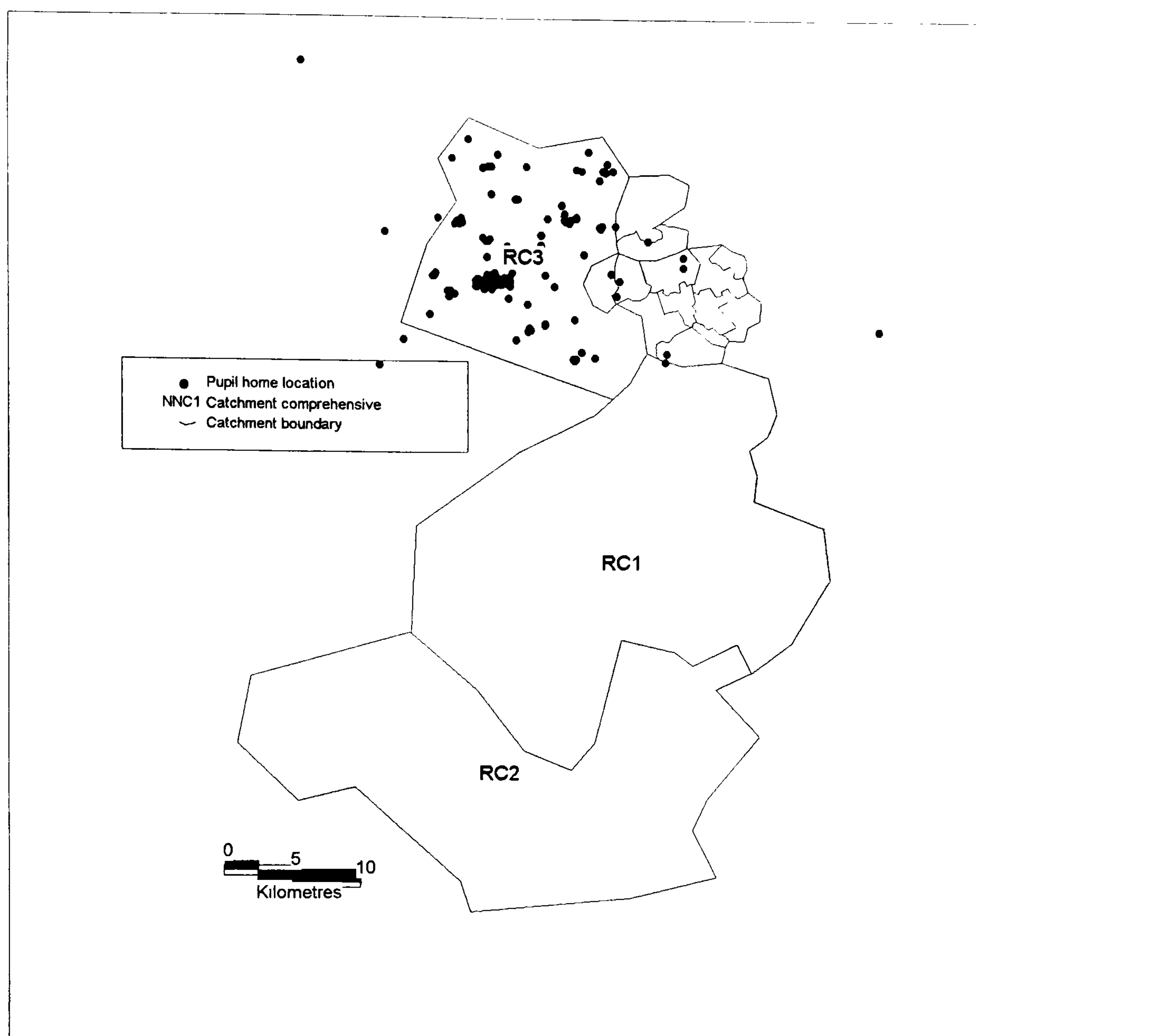
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RC1 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995

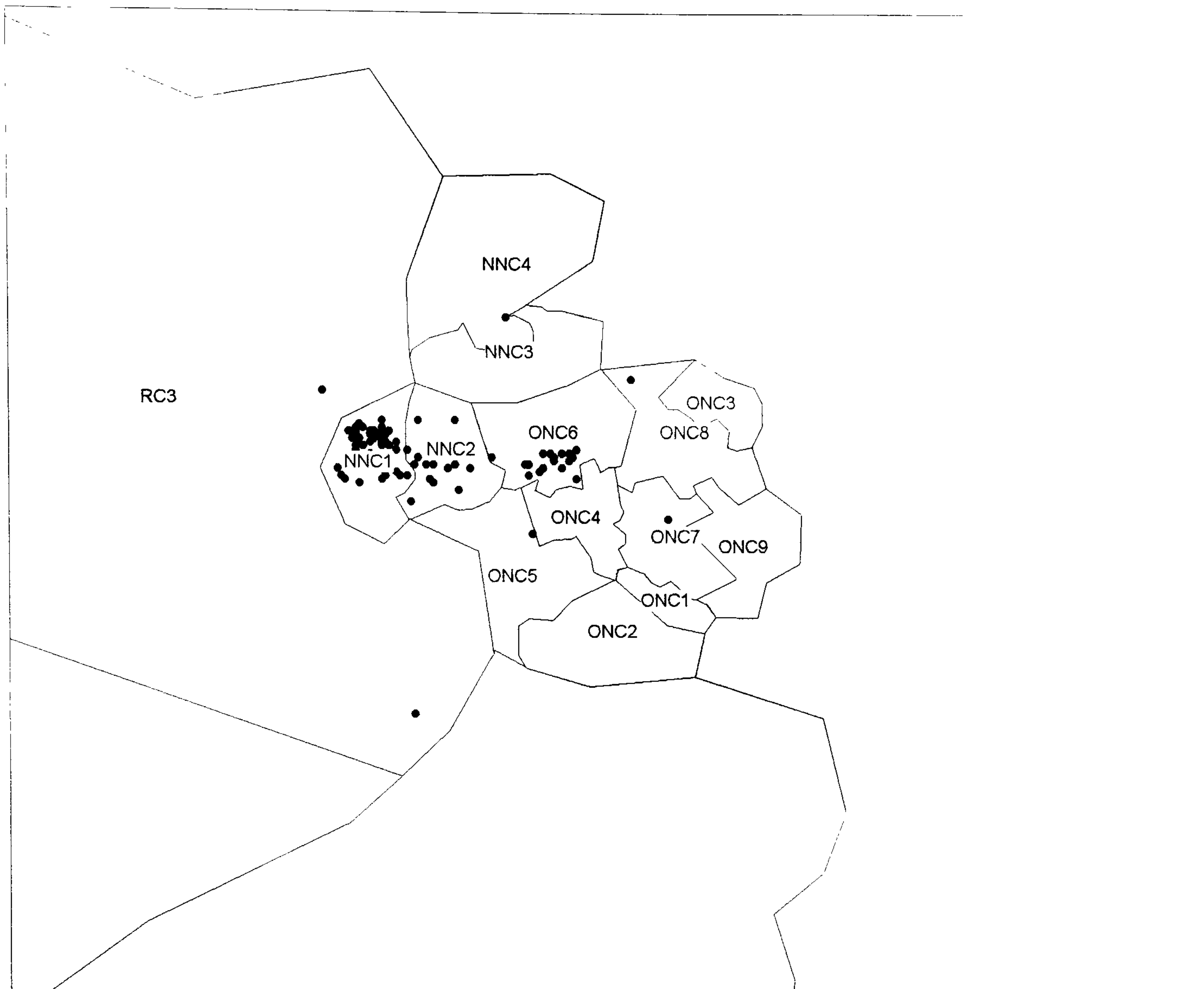


RC2 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



RC3 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995

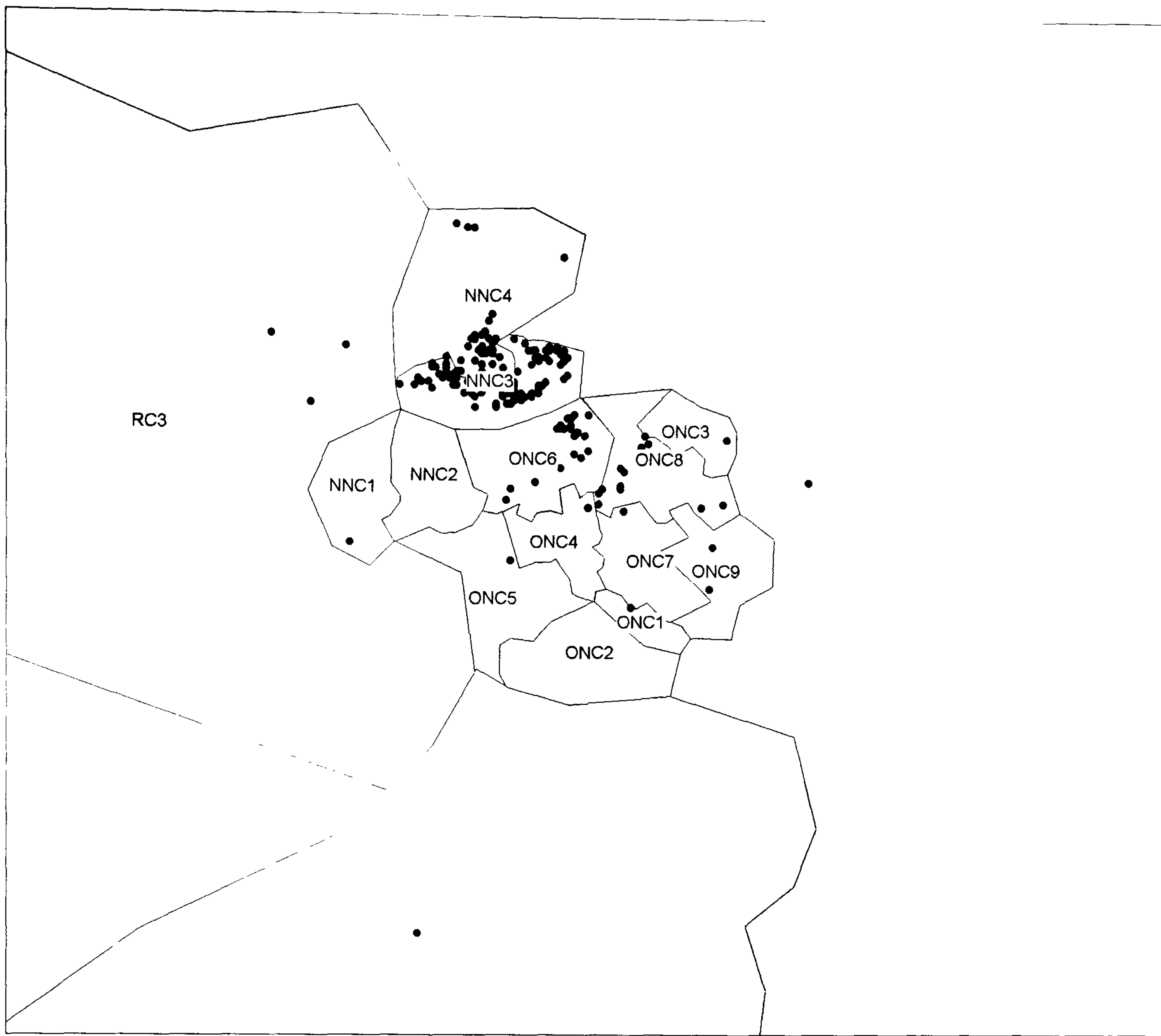
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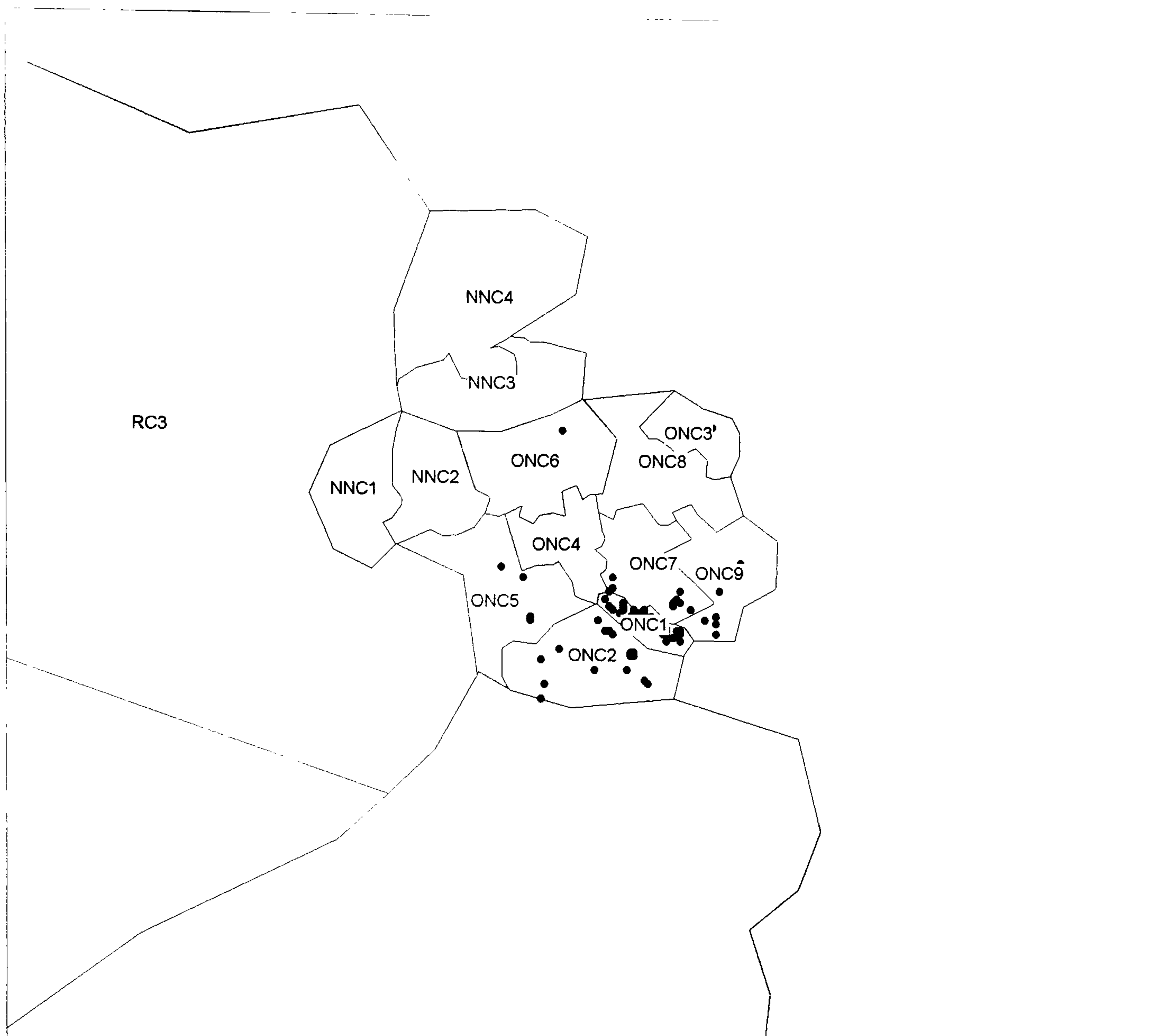
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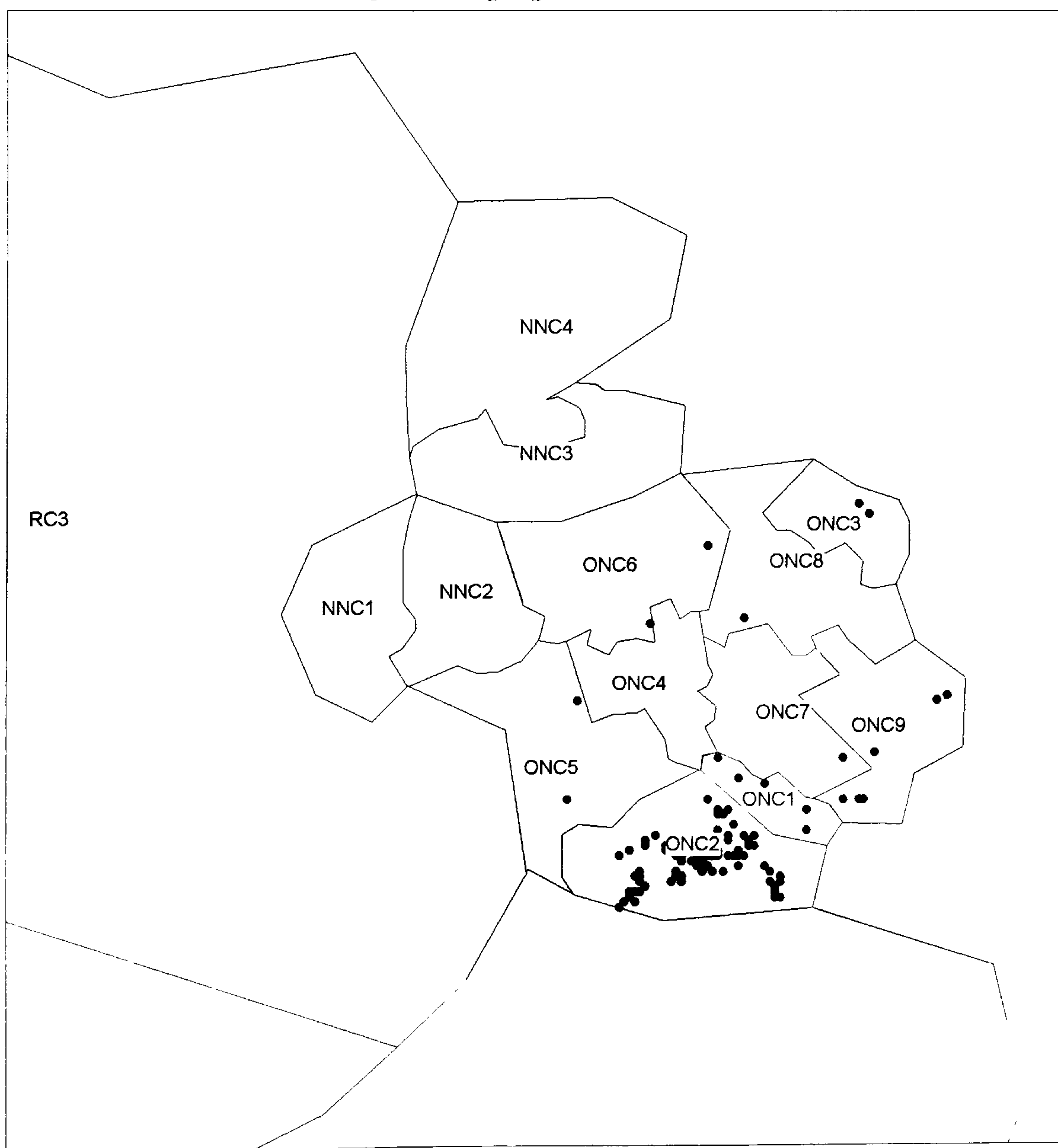
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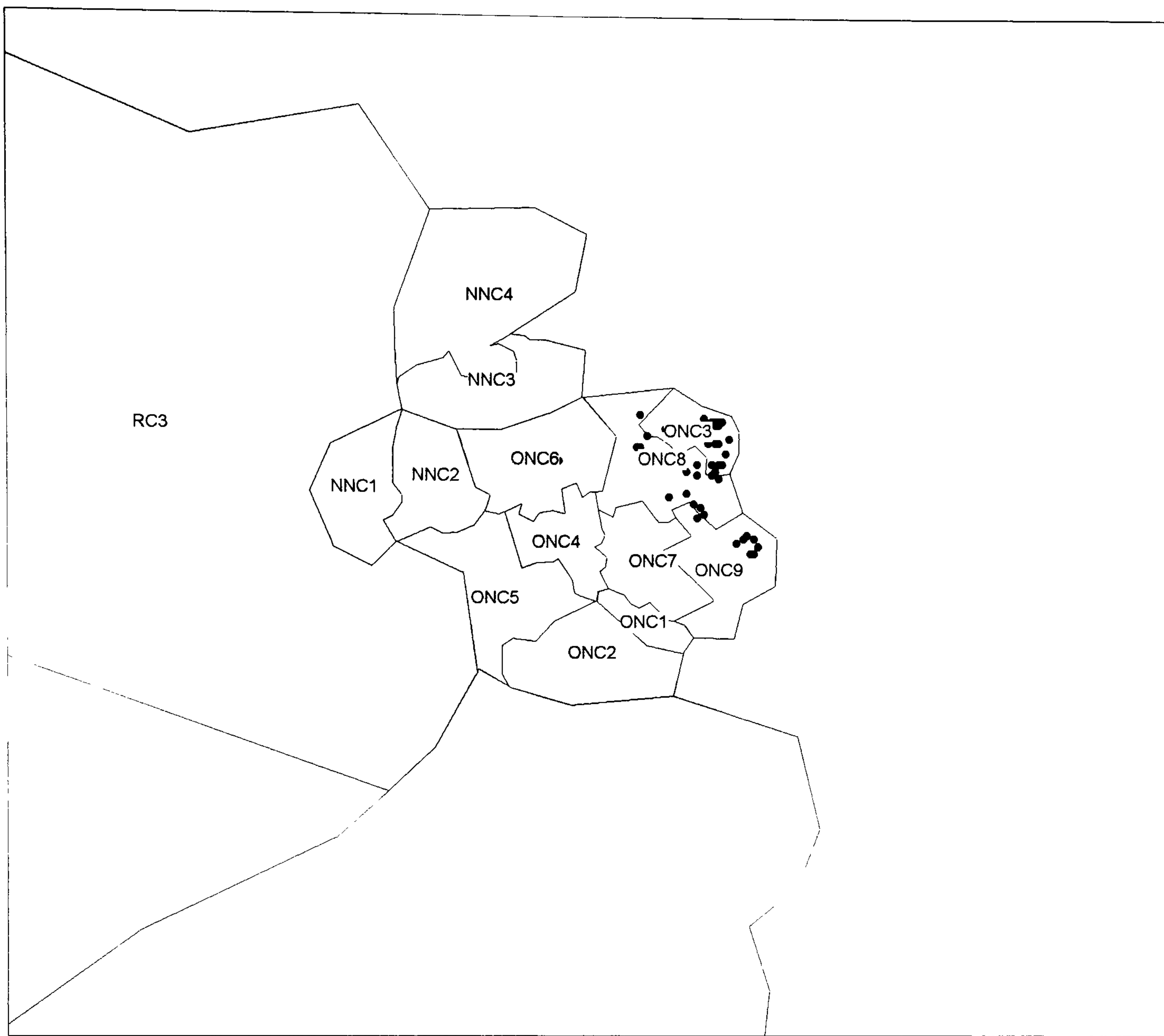
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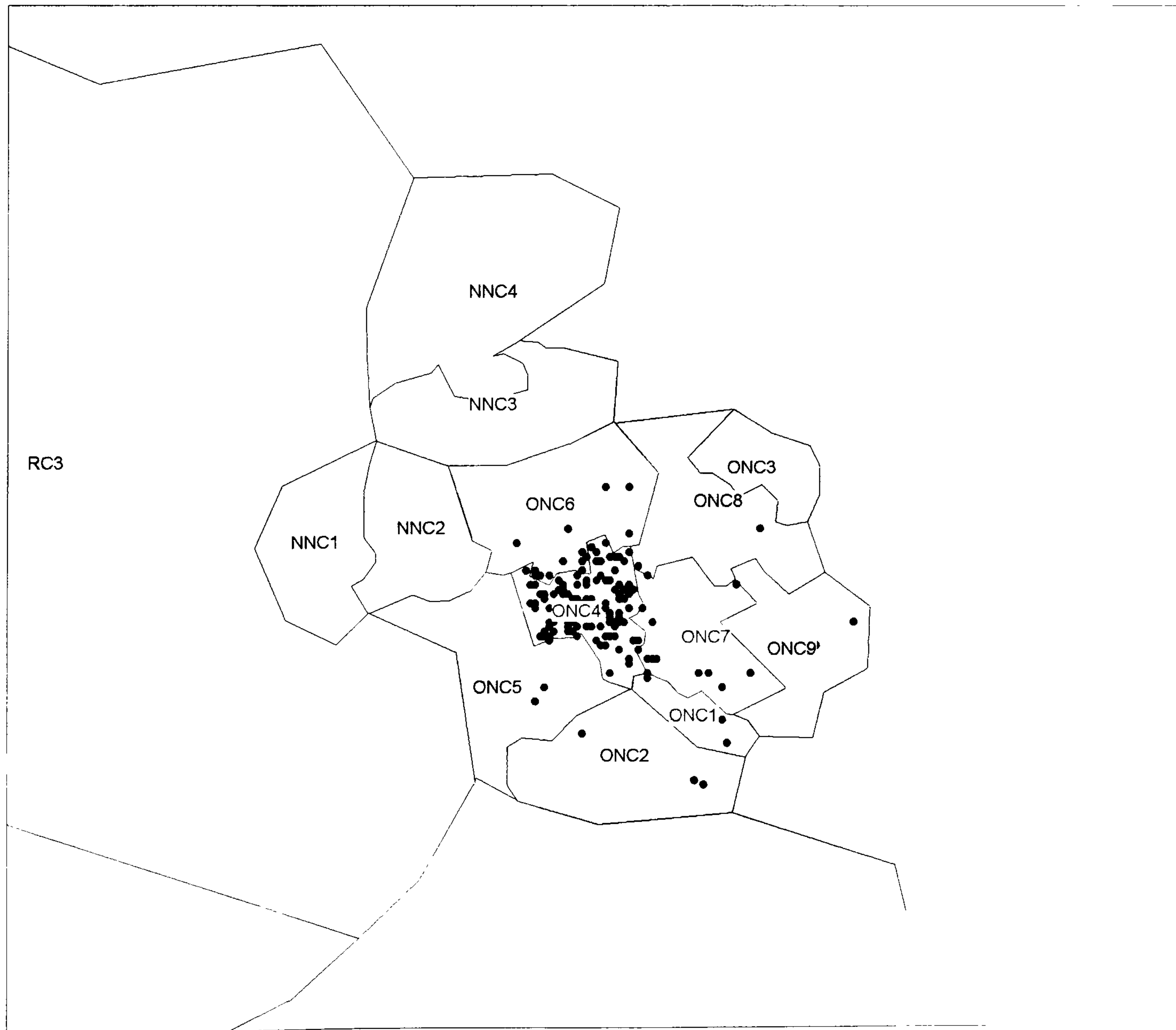
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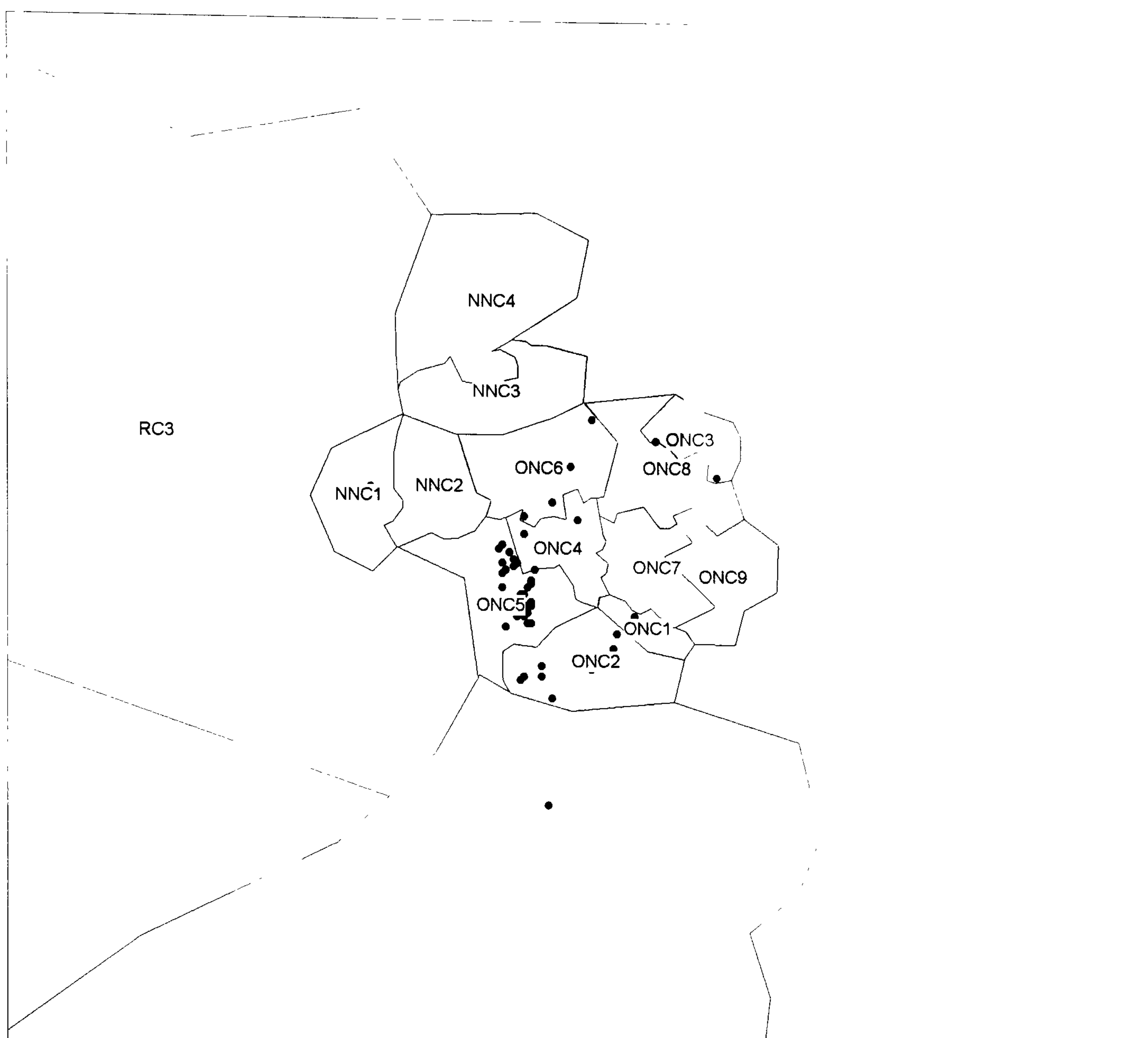
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ONC3 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



ONC4 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



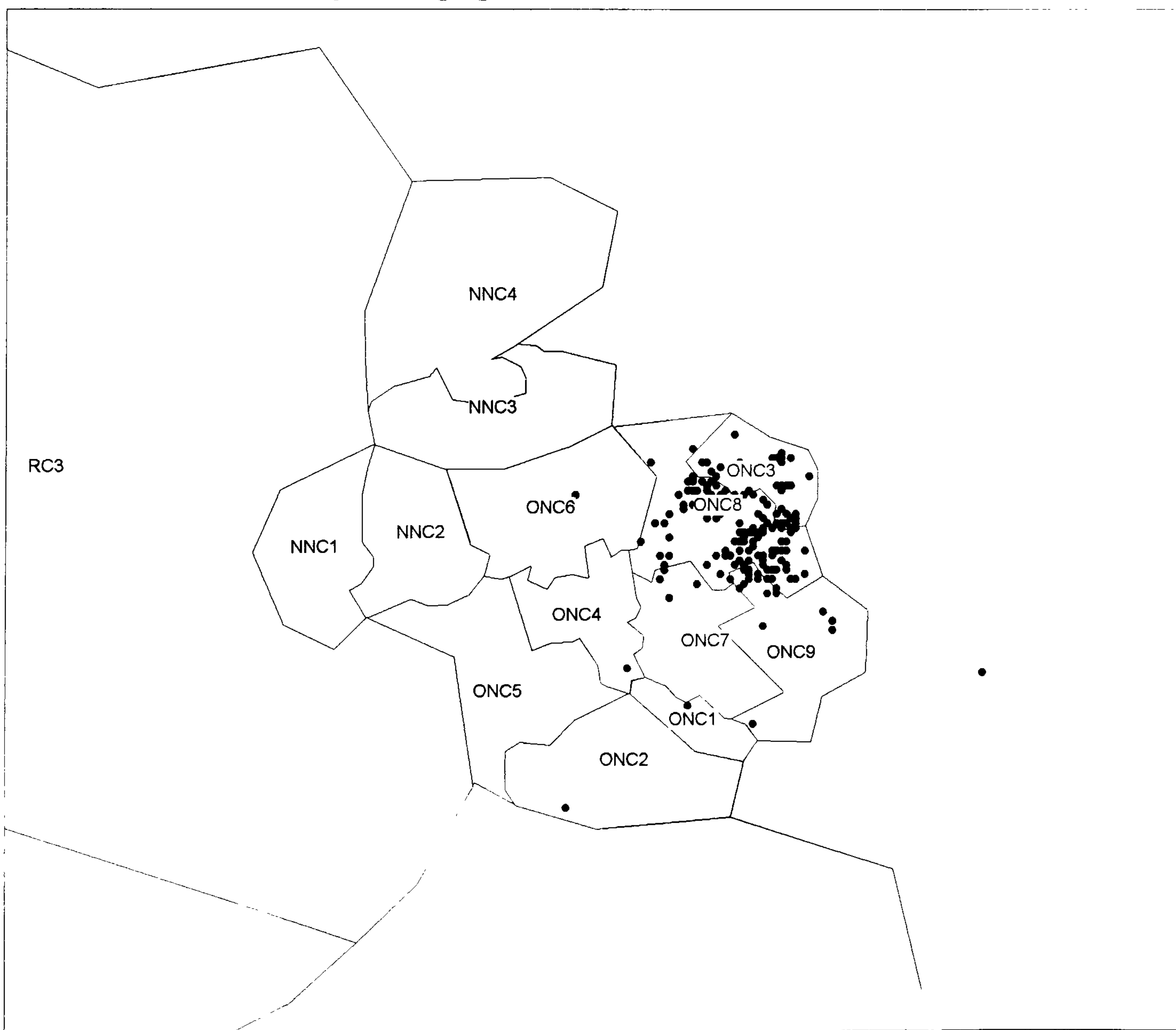
ONC5 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



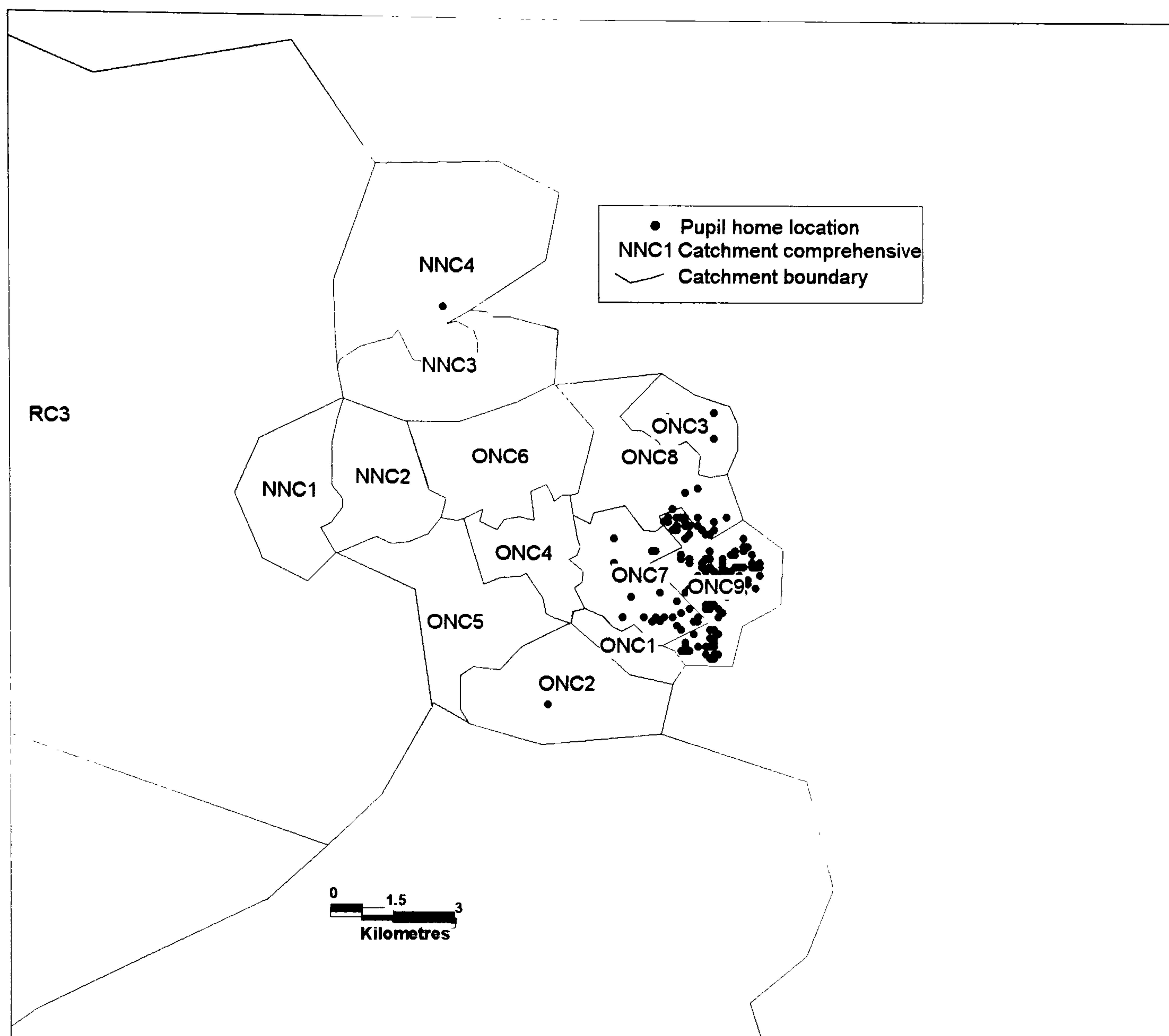
ONC6 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



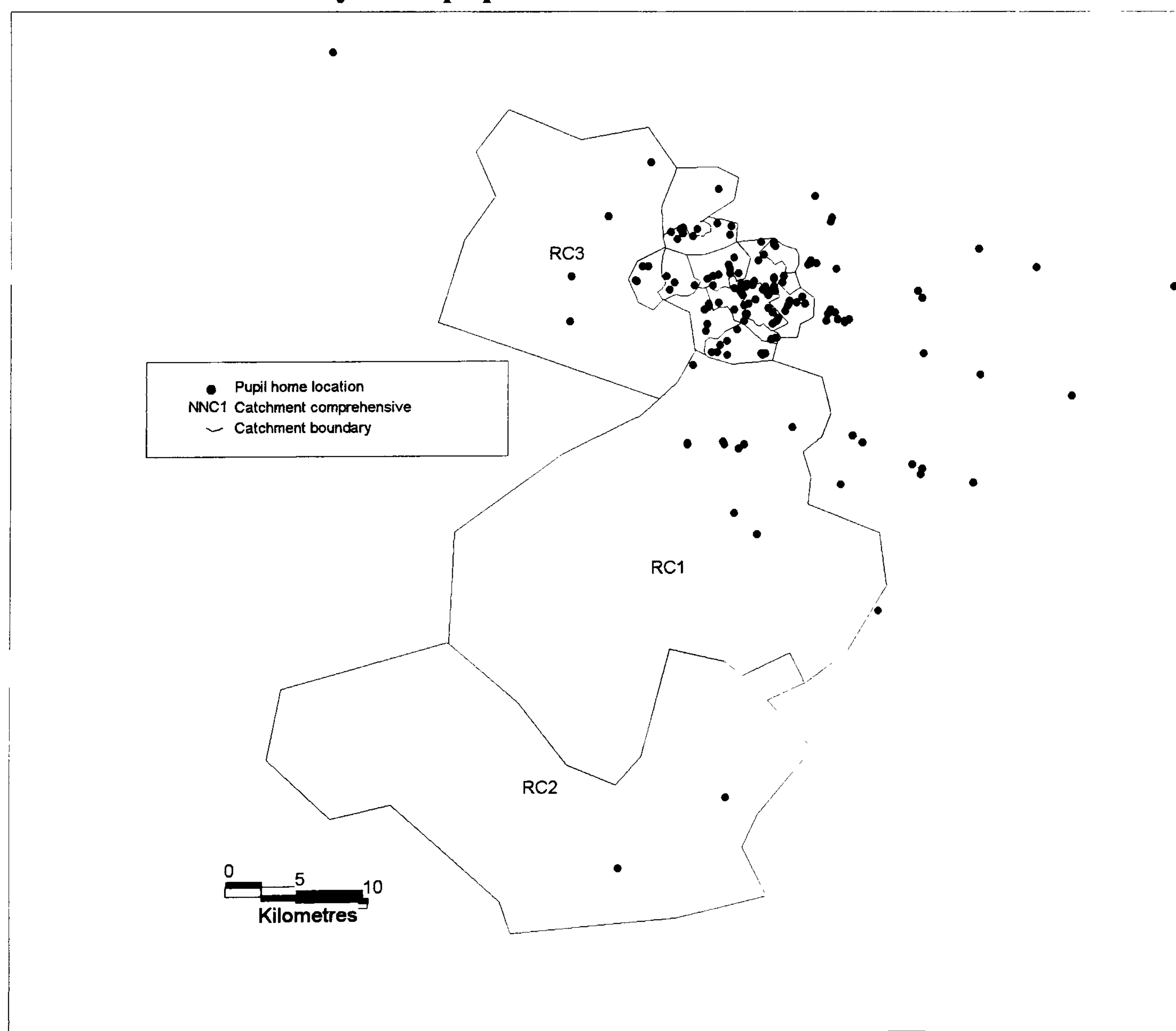
ONC7 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



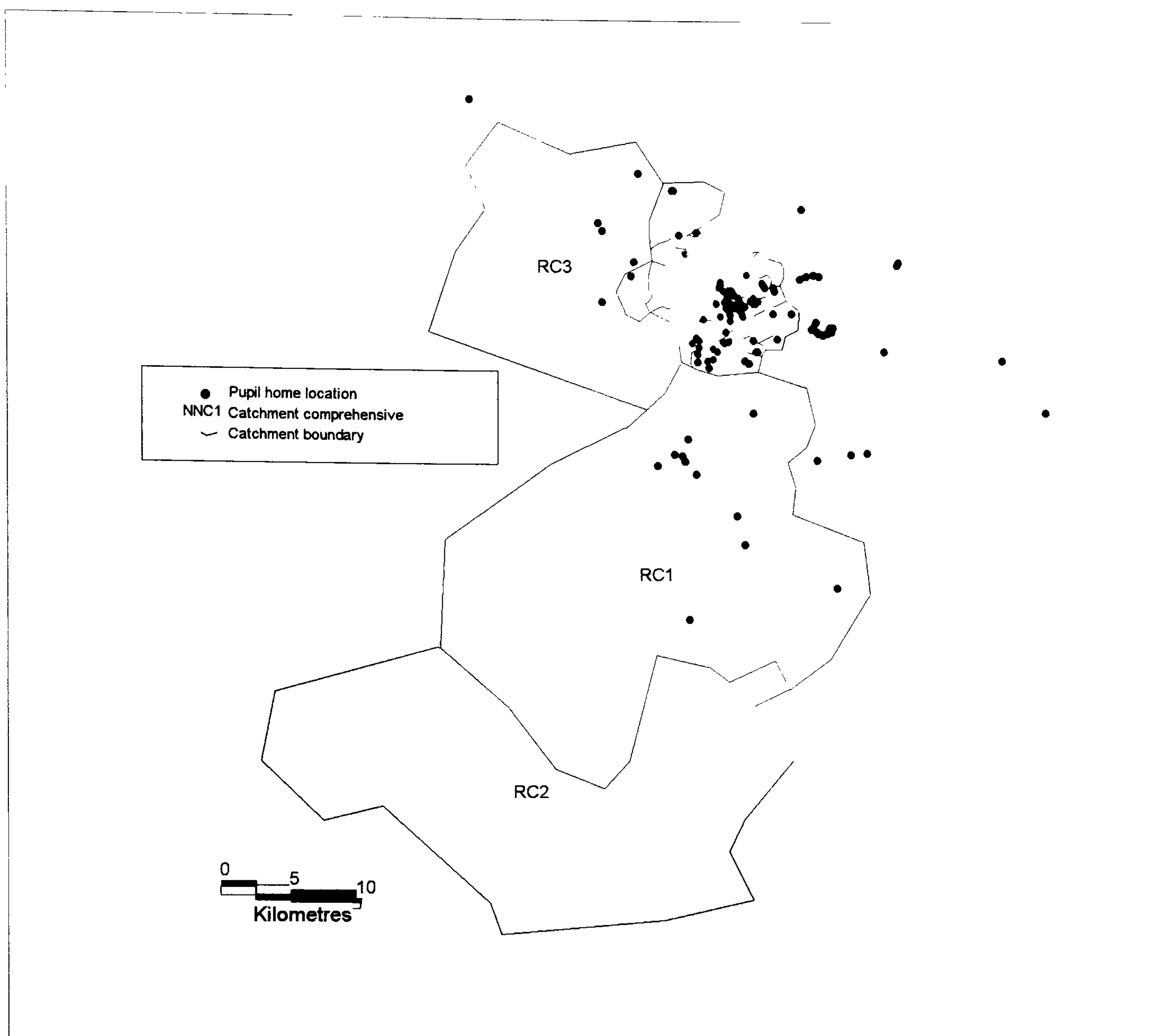
ONC8 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



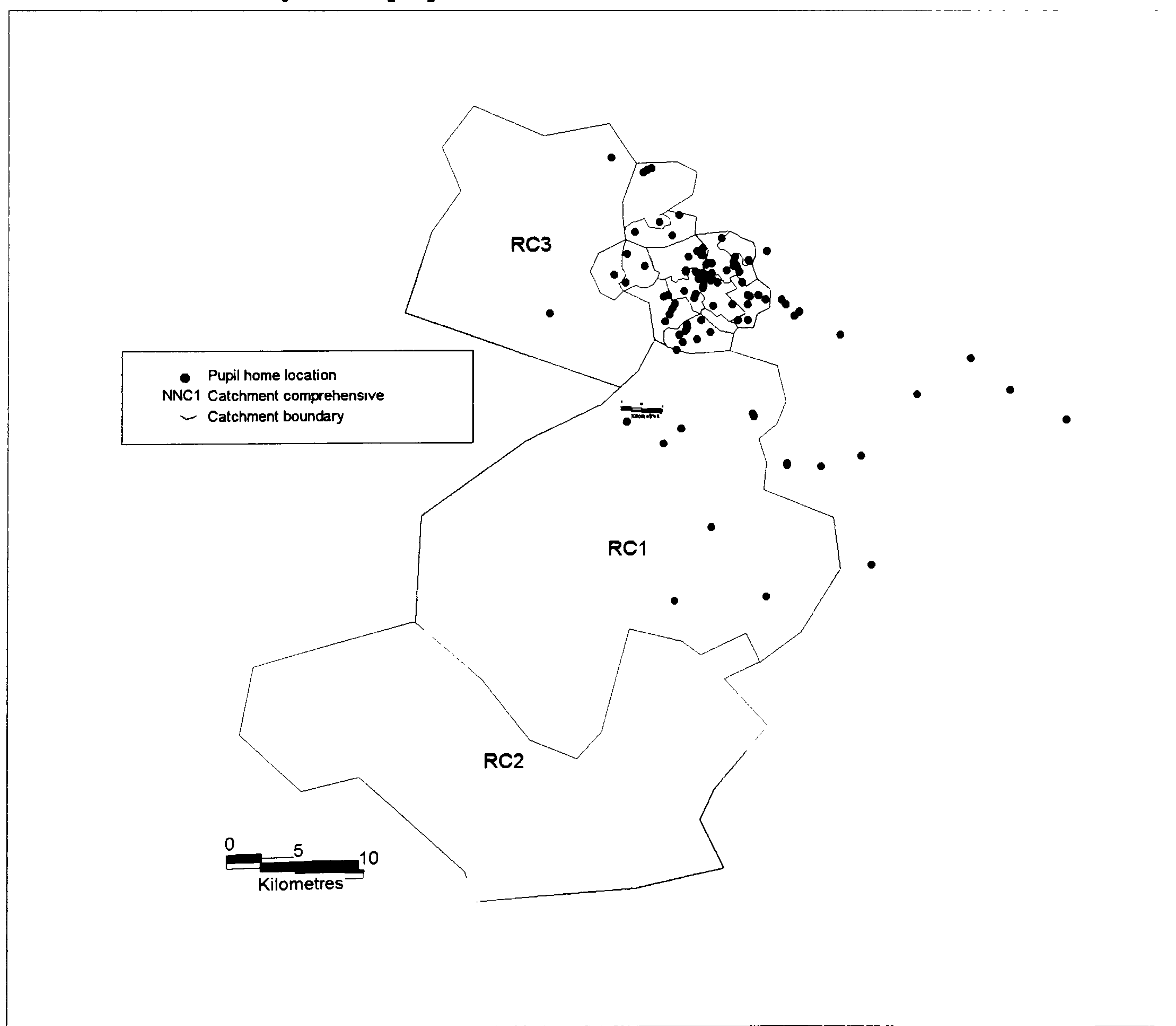
ONC9 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



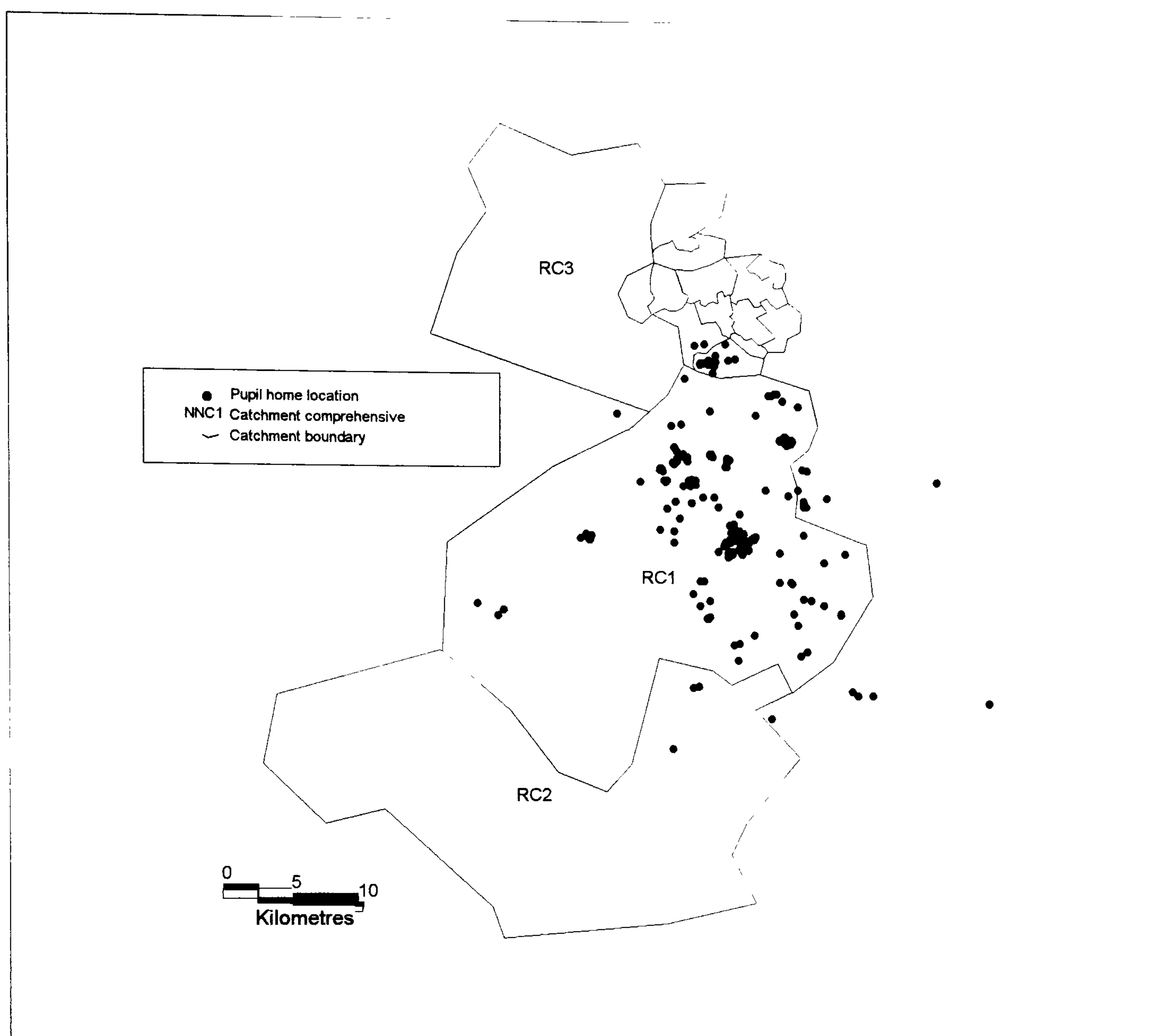
G1 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



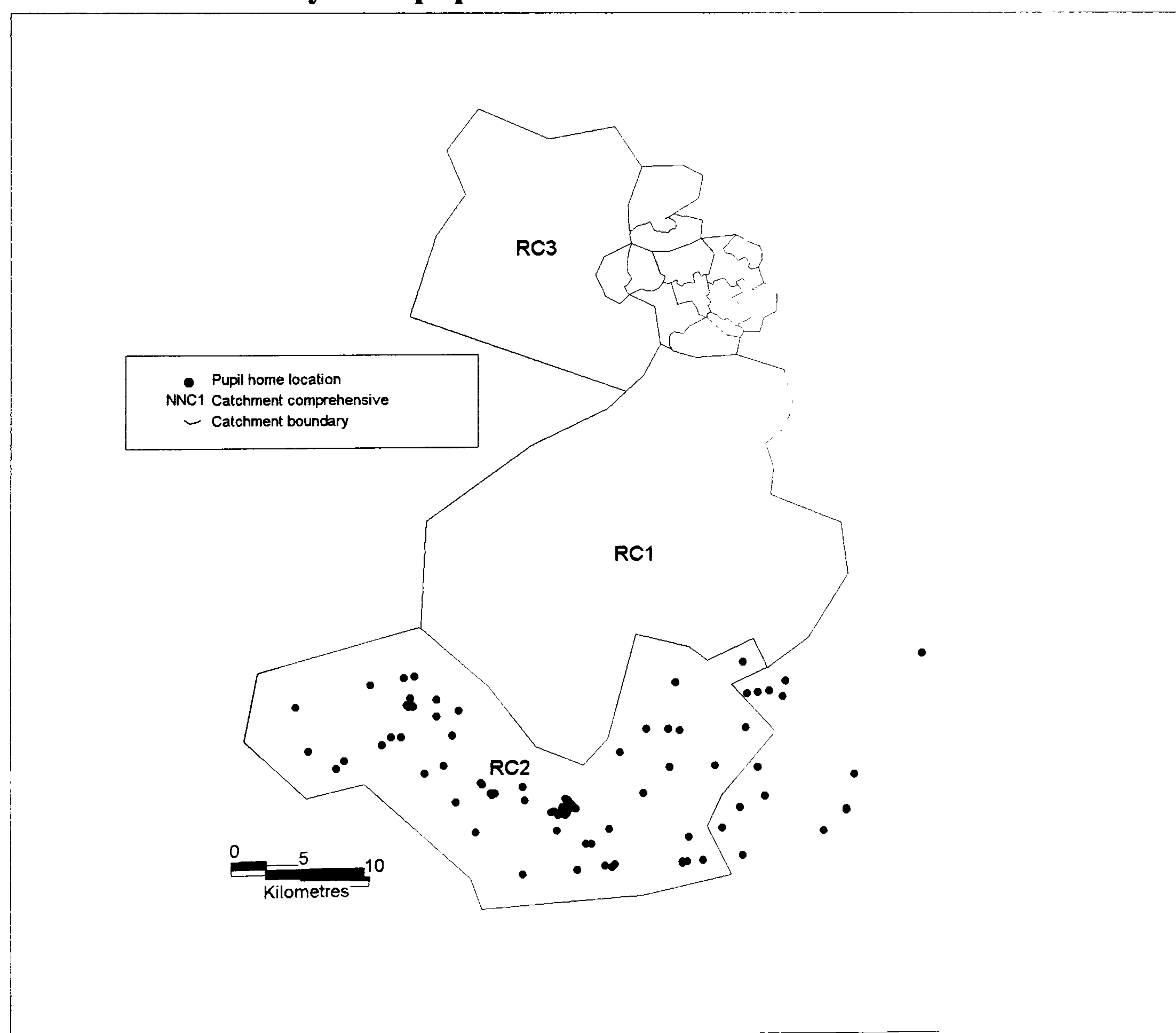
G2 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



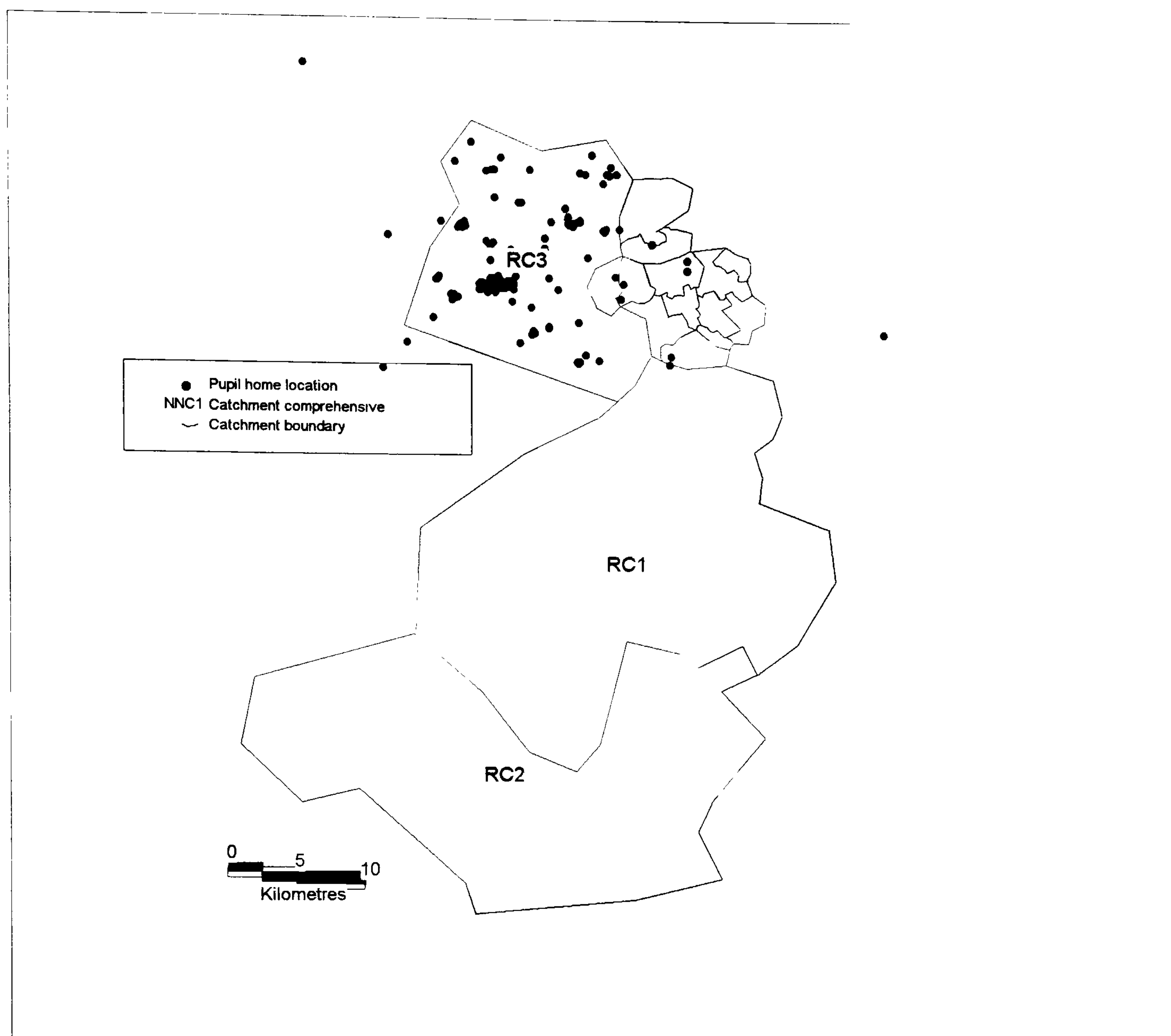
G3 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



RC1 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



RC2 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995



RC3 - Locations of year-6 pupils' homes - 1995

Appendix 2

Local catchment school	1991	1993	1994	1995	Mean 1991-1995 export rate
NNC1	39	39	43	39	40
NNC2	26	28	25	36	29
NNC3	35	26	26	22	27
NNC4	26	37	47	51	40
ONC1	32	42	42	38	39
ONC2	51	55	64	58	57
ONC3	81	71	57	72	70
ONC4	24	18	22	22	22
ONC5	16	20	19	36	22
ONC6	41	51	56	54	50
ONC7	41	42	41	46	43
ONC8	56	55	49	58	55
ONC9	38	38	37	45	40
RC1	8	9	11	16	11
RC2	3	4	1	4	3
RC3	16	9	6	15	11
Total	33	34	35	39	35

Table A.2.1 - Percentage of year 6 pupils attending schools outside the local catchment

Attendance at grammar or denominational school within catchment not defined as 'export' in this table

Local catchment school	1991	1993	1994	1995	Mean export rate
NNC1	39	39	43	39	40
NNC2	26	28	25	36	29
NNC3	35	26	26	22	27
NNC4	26	37	47	51	40
ONC1	32	42	42	38	39
ONC2	47	52	59	55	53
ONC3	81	71	57	71	69
ONC4	24	18	22	22	22
ONC5	16	20	19	36	22
ONC6	41	51	56	54	50
ONC7	39	38	38	44	40
ONC8	55	54	48	57	53
ONC9	38	38	37	45	40
RC1	8	9	11	16	11
RC2	3	4	1	4	3
RC3	16	9	6	15	11
Total	32	33	34	38	34

Table A.2.2 - Percentage of year 6 pupils attending schools outside the local catchment

Attendance at grammar or denominational school within catchment defined as 'export'

Appendix 3 Movement of year 6 pupils between catchments

1991																						
Catchment school		Intake school																				
NNC1	NNC2	NNC3	NNC4	ONC1	ONC2	ONC3	ONC4	ONC5	ONC6	ONC7	ONC8	ONC9	RC1	RC2	RC3	D1	D2	G1	G2	G3	Total	
NNC1	92	43	1	1					1							2	3	2	3	3	140	
NNC2	40	151										1					1	2	2	1	4	192
NNC3			128	49					1							1	3	1	9	4	2	179
NNC4	1		19	105					2								2	3	1	7	1	127
ONC1					55	7	1	2	1	1		1	1	1			3	6	2	1		69
ONC2					22	139		30	2	1	2	1	18				21	21	11	6	5	218
ONC3	1		8	3			26	1	2	3	72	3	3				8	2	1		2	122
ONC4				1	2	2		196	2	10	1						5	10	17	8	1	216
ONC5			1		1	2		7	196	1	3	1					6	4	2	5	4	212
ONC6	16	4	35	6	1		1	19		185	2	2				2	11	12	9	1	5	273
ONC7	1		3		8			8		3	168	3	39			2	11	8	12	15	4	235
ONC8	1	4	19	2		1	2	4	12	43	140	9					24	21	18	11	6	237
ONC9	1	2	2	1	3	6	5	1	1	1	15	205					6	18	4	3	11	289
RC1		1	1			1		1					300				3	2	9	6	1	304
RC2														3	176				1			179
RC3	10	6	5	5												238	4	3	1	7	3	264
Total	163	211	222	173	92	158	34	240	234	222	269	235	260	322	176	245	112	115	101	81	49	3256

1993																						
Catchment school		Intake school																			Total	
NNC1	NNC2	NNC3	NNC4	ONC1	ONC2	ONC3	ONC4	ONC5	ONC6	ONC7	ONC8	ONC9	RC1	RC2	RC3	D1	D2	G1	G2	G3	Total	
NNC1	106	50						1									2	3	5	4	3	140
NNC2	40	129	1	1							1					1	1	1	1		2	192
NNC3		1	130	21		1				1							1	1	8	7	4	179
NNC4			36	90													3					
ONC1	1		2		56	4	1	2	5	1	5	7	1			1	4	4	1	1	2	127
ONC2	1	2	1	2	24	135		7	30		6	2	18			20	17	12	14		9	69
ONC3			1	4	1	1	35	1		4	3	55	3			6	5	5	1		1	218
ONC4		1			2	2		182	2	3	3	1				3	6	2	11	9	1	122
ONC5		2		1	3	2		2	157	1	4					7	10	2		2	6	216
ONC6	19	21	45	4		1	1	33	1	159		5	1			2	7	13	5		8	212
ONC7	1		2	1	14	2		5	2	2	170	8	23	2		18	18	18	6	14	6	273
ONC8	1	3	25	5			15	4		15	42	161	14	1		19	20	20	17	9	6	235
ONC9			1	2	7	8	4	1	1		35	15	219			1	12	13	17	3	12	237
RC1			1											272			5	1	11	4	4	289
RC2														5	154							304
RC3			2	2											268			3	9	5	6	179
Total	163	211	222	173	92	158	34	240	234	222	269	235	260	322	176	245	112	115	101	81	49	3256

1994

1994																								
Catchment	NNC1	NNC2	NNC3	NNC4	ONC1	ONC2	ONC3	ONC4	ONC5	ONC6	ONC7	ONC8	ONC9	RC1	RC2	RC3	D1	D2	G1	G2	G3	Total		
NNC1	106	56	1	1													3	2	2	6	4	4	167	
NNC2	40	142	1															1	1	2	2	1	183	
NNC3		1	133	22														4	4	2	4	7	156	
NNC4			45	75						1								3	3	6	6	3	5	122
ONC1					62	7		4	5		8	1	8					2	7	1	1	2	95	
ONC2	1	1	5	1	29	110	2	10	24	1	3	1	1	19			1	32	16	22	13	12	208	
ONC3	3		3	11			69	1	2	8	4	38	10	1				5	1	2	3	1	150	
ONC4		1	1	2	5	4		182	1	3	3							1	7	11	6	5	202	
ONC5	1	1		1	1			5	149		2	1	1					8	6	2	4	1	162	
ONC6	37	9	35	4				26	2	134	1	2					2	12	12	15	1	14	252	
ONC7			3		10			10	5	2	183	4	35	1			1	10	17	15	11	5	254	
ONC8	2	3	14	7	1		15	5		5	39	179	19					16	18	13	12	6	289	
ONC9	1	1	1	2	4	3	8			1	27	14	192					20	13	5	4	7	254	
RC1														257					2	10	12	8	257	
RC2														2	157								159	
RC3			1	4												259	4	1	1	2	5		264	
Total	191	215	243	130	112	124	94	243	188	155	270	239	266	281	157	266	120	109	116	88	76		3174	

1995

1995		Intake school																				Total	
Catchment	NNC1	NNC2	NNC3	NNC4	ONC1	ONC2	ONC3	ONC4	ONC5	ONC6	ONC7	ONC8	ONC9	RC1	RC2	RC3	D1	D2	G1	G2	G3	Total	
NNC1	99	48							1	1							2	1	4	4	1	1	151
NNC2	56	123											1				2	1	1	4		3	182
NNC3		1	148	23													1	1	1	9	2	3	173
NNC4	1		50	60									1					1	1	2	3	4	112
ONC1	2		1	2	57	4		5	2		7	1	2					1	3	2	3		83
ONC2		1			30	105		4	13	1		1	1	19			1	16	16	15	16	12	176
ONC3		1	2	10	1	2	34		1	3	1	53	3					2	4	4		1	111
ONC4			1	1	1	1		187	4	4	2	1					5	9	9		11	6	201
ONC5	1	5	1	3	9	2		2	117		4	1		3	1			12	3	7	3	7	149
ONC6	18	21	21	26	1	1	1	27	4	147	3	1	1				2	17	6	10	5	9	273
ONC7	1	1	1	9	11	1		14		2	157	6	22		1			13	13	18	15	8	226
ONC8	1	1	12	15		1	18	2	1	15	46	149	10				25	23	12	13	15	271	
ONC9		1	2	13	6	6	9	2	1	3	48	22	202				23	13	13	6	4	8	315
RC1						1			3	1				238			1	1	2	12	13	11	245
RC2															5	153				2			158
RC3	11	4	4	3				1									240	4	3	4	6	2	263
Total	190	207	244	165	115	124	62	244	147	177	268	235	242	266	154	249	123	102	120	95	90		3089

Appendix 4 - Parental choice questionnaire

Parental Choice Questionnaire This is the parental choice questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in the home, so that all questions were read to the interviewees. The interview started with an introduction to the survey and reassurances as to confidentiality, etc. An ice-breaking section about sources of information for choice is followed by an investigation of how the choice process was carried out and influenced. There is a section of questions about the practicality of choice - transport, geography, etc., and, finally, some general questions on the overall process together with an opportunity for parents to express any other thoughts and the recording of categorical information. The following is the form that was used when administering the questionnaire.

Introduction

My name is Eddie Parsons. I am a research student at the University of Plymouth.

I am conducting research into the choice of secondary school for children in this area.

As part of this research I am interviewing parents in about 160 homes in the area. They are all, like yourself, randomly selected. The interviews should take no more than half an hour.

At the end of the survey I should have a much better idea of the importance of all the different factors in choice of secondary school.

I can assure you that everything you say will be absolutely confidential. No-one other than myself will have access to the record of this interview. In particular, no information that can identify you individually will be given to the Local Education Authority or local schools.

Before I start the questions I should point out that you are under no obligation to proceed with the interview. If at any time you wish to withdraw from the interview, then feel free to do so. Also, if you do not want to answer any particular question, then we can just skip it and continue with the interview.

If you are happy then, we'll start. Do you mind if I record the interview?

Introduction

I am going to ask you a series of questions about your choice of preference of secondary school for your child. Please let me know if any of the questions are unclear.

Sources of information

The first questions are about how you got the **information** that helped decide the choice of preference of secondary school for your child last Autumn.

1.1. Did you go to any secondary school Open Days or Open Evenings? []

1.1.1 If so, how many? []

1.1.2 Which schools?

1.2 Did you talk to anyone at the Local Education Authority when deciding on your choice of preference of secondary school? []

1.2.1 If you did, were they, on the whole

Very helpful, quite helpful or not helpful? []

1.3 Did you find the secondary transfer booklet (*show copy*)

Very helpful, quite helpful or not helpful? []

1.3.1 If not helpful, why not?

1.4 Last autumn you gave the Local Education Authority your first preference of secondary school for your child. I'd like you to tell me what you think were the two most important sources of information used in coming to that decision. As a help, I will give some examples of information sources, but if there was something else you think was more important then please say. The examples are:

Source of information	Rank
School prospectus	
School Open Day/Evening	
Primary school	
Friends of yours or your child	
Your child	
Stories in the newspaper or on TV	
Other...	

The decision making process

2.1 I'd now like to know about the type of school you would **ideally** like your child to attend. I will give some reasons for choosing a school. For each of them, please tell me how important they are for you. Remember, I am asking you about an ideal choice of school, not how you actually made your choice. For each reason please tell me whether it is very important, quite important or not important in choosing a school.

Factor	v. imp.	q. imp.	not imp.
High academic standards - good examination results			
Easy to travel to/convenient			
Extra-curricular activities (sport, music, etc.)			
Discipline			
Size of school			
A happy atmosphere at the school			
Availability of particular subjects such as languages or individual sciences			

[]

2.2 Do you have any preference as to whether your child attends a single sex or a mixed school?

2.2.1 If yes, which would you prefer your child to go to? []

2.2.2 Would you strongly object to your child going to *unfavoured school type*? []

2.3 Would you strongly object to your child going to any of the following types of school?

School Type	Object?
Comprehensive	
Grammar	
Denominational	
Private	

2.4 Are there any other reasons apart from the ones we have mentioned that you think are very important when it comes to choosing a school. Remember, we are still talking about an ideal choice of school rather than your actual choice of school.

2.5 Of all the reasons for choosing a school we have talked about, which is the most important for you?

School preference table

I am now going to ask you questions about the way you actually decided on the first preference of school for your child that you gave to the Local Education Authority last autumn. First of all, please describe how you went about choosing a school.

2.6 Which schools were basically acceptable for your child? By 'basically acceptable' I mean that you would not mind your child going there and that they were not too difficult to travel to. Here is a list of schools in the LEA area in case you need reminding.

2.7 Which of these schools did you seriously consider for your child?

2.8 Which was your first preference, as given to the Local Education Authority?

2.9 What was the deciding factor? - *prompt for deciding factor*

2.10 Although in practice you chose *first preference school*, would you, **ideally** have preferred your child to go to another school from those you said were acceptable?

2.10.1 If yes, why did you not put it first choice.

[illegible]

2.11 Has your child been allocated to your first choice school? []

2.11.1 If not, what happened?

2.12 How sure were you of getting your first choice accepted:?

Very sure, quite sure, not sure []

2.13 Please say how much you agree with the following statement:

First choice school is an excellent school. Do you:

strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree []

2.13.1 *If child is not attending first choice school:*

Again, I'd like you to tell me how much you agree with this statement:

Allocated school is an excellent school

Do you: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree []

2.14 Does your child have older brothers or sisters? []

2.14.1 If so, which secondary school do or did they attend?

2.15 Which secondary school will most of your child's friends attend?] []

2.16 How difficult was it to make your choice of school preference for your child:

Very difficult, quite difficult, quite easy, easy []

2.16.1 If difficult, why?

Convenience of choice/travel

I am now going to ask you some questions about the practicalities of your child getting to secondary school.

3.1 First, how will your child normally travel to secondary school?

If parents don't give simple answer, then say: if your child will use more than one travel method in getting to school, please tell me what they are, with the longest first. If the method will be different in the morning and afternoon, please describe them separately.

Transport method		
	a.m.	p.m.(if diff)
On foot, alone		
On foot, accompanied		
On bicycle		
In parents' car		
In someone else's car		
School bus		
Ordinary bus		
Train		
Other		

3.2 What is your nearest school in terms of the time taken to get there? []

3.2.1 How long would it take to get there on an average day? []

3.2.2 *If the nearest school is not the school to be attended or first preference, ask:* Why didn't you choose the nearest school for your child?

3.2.2 *If the nearest school is not the school allocated, ask:* How long do you think it would have taken your child to get to *the allocated school* on an average day?

3.3 Would any other school have been preferable if a bus service had been available? []

3.3.1 If so, which? []

3.4 Was the local secondary school important in choosing where you now live? []

3.4 If so, was it Very important or Quite important? []

General

I now want to ask a couple of general questions about the process of choosing a secondary school for your child.

4.1 On the whole, how well do you think the LEA parental choice system works?

Works very well, quite well, neither well nor badly, quite badly, very badly []

4.1.2 If badly/very badly, why?

4.2 Is there anything else you would like to say about the parental choice process

Categorical

7.1 Please say, for each parent, if in paid employment, the type of work you usually do:

7.1.1 Mother

7.1.2 Father

7.2 Will you be moving house before your child starts secondary school []

7.2.1 If yes, where are you moving to? []

7.3 What type of secondary school did parents attend

7.3.1 Mother []
7.3.2 Father []

7.4 How many cars are owned by the family ? []

	Mother	Father
7.5 In which of these age ranges are you?		
Range		
Under 35		
35 - 44		
45 and over		

7.6 Do both parents live at home address []

7.7 Who was present at interview []

7.8 Child gender []

7.9 School catchment []

7.10 Postcode []

Appendix 5

Letter from LEA to parents requesting participation in survey

Dear ParentUNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH CHOICE OF SCHOOL SURVEY

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to take part in a survey about the reasons why parents choose a particular school for their child. Your name has been chosen at random from my list of parents whose children transfer from primary to secondary school in September.

The survey is being carried out by the University of Plymouth, with my help. The person conducting the survey is Eddie Parsons of the Department of Geographical Sciences at the University. He would like to interview a number of parents in their homes.

The results of the survey will be published in professional journals and made available to the Local Education Authority. It should help to give us a better understanding of how parental choice of school actually works.

If you agree to be interviewed, the information you give and your personal details will be kept entirely confidential. In particular, no information about you will be passed on to schools or the Local Education Authority. It will be impossible to identify any individual in the published results. If you are not willing to be interviewed, then your address will not be given to the University.

The interview itself may take up to half an hour and will be held at a time suitable to you. If you are prepared to take part then please complete the enclosed form. This will show when you are most likely to be available for the interview and give a contact telephone number. Then send the form back in the reply paid envelope provided.

If you have any questions about this survey, please ring this office or Eddie Parsons at the University of Plymouth (tel. 01752 233046). We would be very pleased if you would help us with this work. Thank you in advance for your co-operation.

Yours sincerely,

CHOICE OF SCHOOL SURVEY

Please complete and return this form in the pre-paid envelope provided if you would be willing to take part in the survey.

(NAME AND ADDRESS OF PARENT(S))

Contact telephone number

Tick the appropriate box(es) below to indicate those times when you are most likely to be available for interview:

Time/Day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Morning (9am - Noon)							
Afternoon (2-5pm)							
Evening (6-9pm)							

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