

Health Inequalities: Peer Research into the Role of Communities

Littering

Scotland has some of the worst health and widest health inequalities in Europe. People with the lowest incomes are more likely to live for 26 years less in good health than those with the highest incomes.¹ We also know that more deprived areas tend to experience poorer health. Our **Health Inequalities: Peer Research into the Role of Communities** project aimed to explore how the communities that children grow up in contribute to these inequalities.

The project engaged 15 young peer researchers from Dalmarnock Primary School, Glasgow and Baldrigon Academy, Dundee, to explore how the places where they live affect health and wellbeing and how they contribute to inequalities in health.

The young peer researchers from each school delivered focus groups and conducted an ethnography of their local area. They identified three main areas they wanted to focus their research on:

- + Safety
- + Littering
- + Family and Friends

This briefing will focus on the **Littering** aspect of their research.

Research Findings

In the ethnographic element of research, the young peer researchers explored the communities they lived in by foot. They found repeated evidence of discarded items and furniture. The peer researchers felt this posed a physical risk to children and young people, who might want to play on them. We also saw evidence of these items taking up space on the pavement and making it difficult for children and parents with pushchairs to walk past, without using the road. They felt these sorts of issues would affect what parents and carers would allow children to do on their own.

Academic researchers call this opportunity to do things alone 'independent mobility'. The concept of independent mobility has been widely researched and has been shown to have a range of benefits for children and young people. It can affect brain development, confidence and self-esteem, all of which benefit children throughout their life.² Local communities need to be made as safe as possible to allow for this independent mobility, this obviously includes removing any discarded objects that could cause injury and harm.

The young peer researchers also felt that excess litter could affect how people felt about the area they lived in. They were worried about how it could bring rodents in or make the place look unclean. They felt this might contribute to stigmatisation of the area and make people not want to invite their friends to visit. This in turn could affect their opportunities to socialise and play.

They also spoke about finding alcohol bottles and cigarettes on the ground in parks. They spoke about how this could make them avoid parks and green spaces as they would associate this with people drinking. They also recognised that seeing this type of litter might normalise drinking and smoking for some young people. They felt this could affect their health and wellbeing longer term.

The researchers also identified that abandoned buildings could make them feel unsafe and anxious. They spoke about land, not being used for any specific purpose, that often ended up covered in litter. We also found numerous examples of spaces that children and young people do

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/long-term-monitoring-health-inequalities-december-2017/>

² Crawford, S.B., Bennetts, S.K., Hackworth, N.J., Green, J., Graesser, H., Cooklin, A.R., Matthews, J., Strazdins, L., Zubrick, S.R., D'Esposito, F. and Nicholson, J.M., 2017. Worries, 'weirdos', neighborhoods and knowing people: a qualitative study with children and parents regarding children's independent mobility. *Health & Place*, 45, pp.131-13

use, like football pitches, being covered in litter, making them spaces that children might not be comfortable using.

It was clear that the presence of litter can stop children and young people engaging in healthy activities like exercise. It was also clear that abandoned buildings and disused spaces could be put to better use. They have an effect on what people want to do and how they feel about where they live.

Cause of Littering

Participants in the research said they did not think people cared enough about their communities to not drop litter. They felt that over time, littering became normal behaviour, and people just expected these areas to be messy.

The research highlighted that the care taken over an area can affect how people feel about it and how they treat it. Internalising these negative associations of where you live could also affect self-esteem and mental health. For children and young people to feel invested in their communities, these places need to be clean, safe and well kept. We need to show that we value these places and more importantly, the people who live there.

Policy recommendations

It is clear that littering affects how children and young people interact with where they live and what they are able to do there. The young peer researchers made a number of recommendations for decision-makers that relate to littering:

- + Improve the quality of our green spaces so they are places that children and young people can exercise, play, and spend time with friends. Get rid of the litter, and the damaged equipment. We need them to feel safe and that they are ours.
- + Deal with vandalism and regenerate abandoned spaces.
- + Involve children and young people in decisions about the places we live. This is our right.

Our research suggests that littering becomes normalised, it also can affect how proud people feel of their community. We need to break this cycle. We also need to make better use of abandoned and misused spaces which contribute to a lack of pride and affect how children feel about where they live. It is also a waste of valuable public resources. We know that children and young people feel they lack spaces for outdoor activities, so we should making the most of what we have available.

It is essential that policy makers understand the impact of littering on wider public policy goals; ensuring places and spaces are kept clean will improve health and wellbeing. We need to make sure that adequate investment in communities is made to keep them clean and tidy. It is vital that this problem is not individualised, public investment is required to keep improve the quality of the communities children and young people live in.



Contact

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