

Health Inequalities: Peer Research into the Role of Communities

Safety

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 **Safety** aspect of their research.

🔍 Research Findings

Alcohol and Substance Misuse

Peer researchers in both communities had witnessed evidence of alcohol and substance misuse in their local areas.

They identified places where they could find drug paraphernalia and some mentioned feeling unsafe due to the presence of drug dealers in the areas where they lived. They also spoke about how drunk people in the park could make them feel unsafe. The researchers suggested this could mean as a consequence that children and young people avoided certain parks and green spaces. Wider research has shown that drunken behaviour can be a key factor in whether children want to use parks or green space.² This was also confirmed in recent research by the Children's Parliament.³

Accessing parks and green space can be key to positive health and wellbeing for children and young people. It gives them a chance to play and exercise and has benefits for learning and mental health.⁴ The benefits from play are expected to be felt throughout life. If we wish to ensure that children and young people's rights to play are met, we must prioritise tackling alcohol and substance misuse in areas where children live and play.

The young peer researchers also discussed how issues relating to alcohol and drugs might cause people and places to be stigmatised and seen as 'problem places'. Research has shown that stigma can contribute to health inequalities in a number of ways. People who live in stigmatised places have been found to have poorer mental health. There is also a link between stigma and increased rates of smoking.⁵

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

² Danielle van der Burgt (2015) Spatial avoidance or spatial confidence? Youngpeople's agency in the active negotiation of risk and safety in public space, *Children's Geographies*, 13:2, pp. 181-195.

³ Children's Parliament, 2019, Children's Parliament investigates an Alcohol Free Childhood, Available at: <https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Alcohol-free-Childhood-Online.pdf>

⁴ Multiple refs, See P15 of final report for references: <https://childrenscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Health-Inequalities-Report-Chris-Ross.pdf>

⁵ Multiple refs, See P16 of final report for references: <https://childrenscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Health-Inequalities-Report-Chris-Ross.pdf>

Our research clearly highlighted that children were not only aware from a young age of stigma related to specific communities but could also be affected by it. It is essential that we change the narrative about communities and support positive messaging about these places and the people who live there. Ensuring they are safe for children and young people to play and exercise is a key part of this.

Violence

The young peer researchers described their knowledge of violence, knife crime threats, and physical harm all occurring in the areas where they lived.

Research has shown that these forms of crime can often take place in parks and other spaces used by children and young people.⁶ The peer researchers felt that crime in the area was likely to contribute to their avoidance of specific places in the community and the areas affected by it.

The young peer researchers also spoke about how violence and knife crime made them afraid of getting hurt. They discussed how this could make young people not want to leave their houses and could make them mistrust others in the community. Many also discussed similar fears about being robbed and how they did not trust their neighbours when they went on holiday.

It is clear that crime in the area affects social cohesion and how people feel about those they live near to. This has the potential to affect how children and young people interact with their local community from a young age and influence how they use the resources that can benefit their health and wellbeing.

Adults

Throughout the research we heard about the importance of responsible adults in helping children and young people to feel safe. The peer researchers spoke about the role family plays in their community in making them feel safe. They also mentioned other adults who have trust in the community like police officers. Academic research has similarly shown the value children place on trusting relationships.⁷

The research also highlighted how people exhibiting certain types of behaviours could make them feel unsafe. They discussed how drunk people could make them feel unsafe as it could make young people feel like they were not in control. The focus groups also identified a perception of people in the community who may want to harm children. The researchers felt concerns of this nature could affect how much children get to do outside on their own. Research from The Netherlands has shown that fears about children being hurt by other people can affect whether parents let them go outside alone.

Getting opportunities to do things alone is very important for children and young people. Researchers have termed this 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.⁸

It is clear that behaviour exhibited by adults can affect how children and young people feel in their community. It makes them feel less safe and able to use the spaces they want to. It appears to particularly affect what children and young people want to do on their own. This has the potential to affect them throughout their life.

⁶ Burman, M., Brown, J., Tisdall, J., Batchelor, S., 2000. A View from the Girls: Exploring Violence and Violent Behavior, Economic & Social Research Council. Available from: <http://www1.rhnc.ac.uk/sociopolitical-science/VRP/Findings/rfburman.PDFS>

⁷ Multiple refs, See P18 of final report for references:

<https://childreninScotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Health-Inequalities-Report-Chris-Ross.pdf>

⁸ 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

Policy recommendations

We have a collective responsibility to make communities safer for the children and young people who grow up in them. The young peer researchers have provided a range of recommendations for decision makers to ensure this happens:

- + We would like more visible responsible adults in our communities to make us feel safe – this could include schools staff, police, community wardens or known and trusted family members etc.
- + Improve the quality of our green spaces so they are places we can exercise, play, and spend time with friends in.
- + Have support services for children, young people and adults to help deal with substance misuse – and find creative ways to advertise them through posters and radio. We want support not stigma.
- + Provide opportunities in the community to build positive relationships so that we can take pride in where we live. This could include community groups, local events, markets or small local festivals.
- + Involve children and young people in decisions about the places we live. This is our right.

It is obvious that work needs to be done to tackle the underlying causes of crime and substance misuse. This includes meaningful action on reducing poverty and income inequality.

It is also clear that the places that children and young people grow up need to be designed with children and young people in mind. The UNICEF Child Friendly Cities model presents a framework for this. This will support development of safe play spaces.



Contact

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