Low-income neighbourhoods in Britain: the gap between policy ideas and residents' realities

Findings
Informing change

June 2011

This summary examines the relationship between 'poverty' and 'place' in six low-income areas, drawing on residents' accounts to explain different patterns of neighbourhood change. It is based on the findings of a four-year research study, which has captured how communities' distinctive socio-cultural and historical features impact on people's experiences and perceptions, and on a report that highlights the implications these have for current policy agendas.

Key points

- People's sense of belonging often mattered most in neighbourhoods where economic prospects were most challenging; the prospect of 'moving out' to new areas might come at the cost of losing social and family networks. If forthcoming social housing and housing benefit reforms oblige low-income households to relocate, this may most affect those with the strongest connections to their existing neighbourhood.
- Neighbourhoods with higher proportions of social housing offered stability for residents where jobs were short-lived and insecure and recurrent poverty was a constant threat. In contrast, many residents in neighbourhoods with growing levels of private renting associated this change with the loss of 'community'.
- Policies to improve conditions in deprived areas need to appreciate different social and cultural histories. The current policy commitment to 'localism' recognises this, but relying on local resources to produce change will be insufficient for communities in weaker housing and labour markets.
- Many people were short of time as well as money, and juggled state, informal and family-based support to 'get by'. Reducing public sector support will not necessarily lead to a greater role for the voluntary sector or the family as the Government suggests .
- The authors conclude that radical thinking about the fate of areas facing long-term decline and entrenched poverty is still needed. The fate of relatively isolated places suffering systemic economic decline, such as older textile and mining towns and villages, requires a radical policy response if this trend is to be turned round.

The research
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Background

This summary is based on a project that explored how the experiences of households living on low incomes in Britain vary over time and in different locations, and assessed the influence of 'place' in people's perceptions, actions and decisions. It compared and contrasted experiences in six low-income areas that have divergent geographical, social and economic characteristics. These areas were:

- *Amlwch* – a small town on the northern tip of Anglesey, Wales, which has suffered rapid economic decline in recent years;
- *West Kensington* – an ethnically mixed area comprising two social housing estates in inner west London;
- *Oxgangs* – a social housing estate located next to an affluent suburb in Edinburgh, Scotland;
- *West Marsh* – an area of predominantly private housing located close to the centre of Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire;
- *Wensley Fold* – an ethnically diverse and mixed-tenure area near the centre of Blackburn, Lancashire;
- *Hillside* – a predominantly social housing estate undergoing major transformation in Knowsley, Merseyside.

Experiencing neighbourhood change

The passage of time was a key reference point for established residents. Three communities (Amlwch, Hillside, West Marsh) were marked by narratives of loss and decline relating to industrial restructuring and the changed nature of their current labour markets, but this was not a prominent feature for the other areas.
In assessing differences among the neighbourhoods, other significant factors were:

- the pattern of residential settlement over time, and the degree of turbulence or stability this created;
- the proportion of younger people in areas where the material condition of amenities and public spaces was declining;
- the extent to which the wider neighbourhood was self-contained or a more diffuse geographical entity for those living there.

An area's historical narrative and collective experiences formed a key signifier of its current social and community dynamics. The pattern and progress of migration was an important factor, as a sustained period of in-migration from a distinctive national or cultural group could lead to a subsequent revitalisation of communal space and increased primary school rolls, for example. Whether existing and new communities then saw this as shared or segregated space was crucial; the evidence pointed to different outcomes across the six neighbourhoods.

Values and lifestyles

The values, priorities and lifestyles of households living in the neighbourhoods were highly varied and sometimes conflicting. However, when asked to make any comparative judgements about how they or their neighbourhood were faring, people tended to reflect on previous points in their own lives, or on how the neighbourhood had changed over time. As a rule, they did not rate their own area or personal circumstances against other places or people.

Many people described their neighbourhood as 'ordinary', effectively bypassing the need to measure their own circumstances against some kind of yardstick. This outlook was also important in framing any decision on whether to stay in the neighbourhood or seek to 'improve' their opportunities by moving elsewhere.
In reflecting on their circumstances, family history was a more potent reference point for people than being influenced by or adopting other groups' values. People referred to learning from direct experience rather than from example. They often expressed values in terms of what seemed the 'right thing to do' in certain situations, 'what mattered', or what was 'normal' or 'natural' and therefore beyond debate or dispute.

Poverty, identity and self-esteem

Households were confronting different degrees of poverty, and it was clear that living on a lower income could be a source of stress and ill-health and could create insecurity and a constant sense of unease. However, people also highlighted the importance of non-material factors in generating a sense of worth or well-being. Although work was a significant source of self-esteem, this was seldom related entirely or even mainly to higher income. People often valued most benefits such as independence, socialising, stimulation and a sense of purpose.

Family responsibilities were the most notable and significant element in most people's sense of achievement. Conversely, concerns about providing adequately for children and other family members were often the source of the greatest self-doubt and concern. Volunteering, community activism, taking part in sports or arts, and socialising were also factors in feeling a sense of worth, particularly in terms of making a wider contribution to society.

People often conceptualised their circumstances as arising from their own inadequacies and deficiencies, including financial and domestic management skills and intelligence. This was set within a wider culture of individual responsibility, in which people gave less emphasis to the causes of poverty than responses to it. Abilities to economise and to be adaptive and creative in order to manage on a low income were a source of self-esteem and a major factor in people's judgement of themselves and others. This focus on personal capability also generated the perceived possibility of future improvement in individual circumstances and prospects.

Social networks at neighbourhood level

People's bonds with family and friends were an important source of support for 'getting by' in these neighbourhoods, and helped them to manage their daily, immediate challenges. The strong ties of attachment and emotional commitment characterising these relationships underpinned three broad forms of help: financial gifts or loans; services and practical tasks (such as help with childcare); and emotional and social support.

Relations with neighbours were more conditional. In some cases, there was a commitment to look out for others, provide practical support and engage in social contact. However, some people, especially younger residents, were more ambivalent about neighbourly relations, preferring to 'keep themselves to themselves'. For some residents, relationships had become more spatially stretched and socially selective and 'regulated'.

Several factors influenced the variations in social bonds and attachments among the six neighbourhoods:

- *Turnover and residential stability* – residentially mobile people often looked outside the neighbourhood for social contacts, while existing residents experienced a gradual depletion of neighbourhood acquaintances.
- *Social and physical characteristics of the area* – opportunities for interactions in public spaces were lacking in West Marsh and, to a lesser degree, in Amlwch and Hillside. These areas also showed high levels of 'defensive' tactics; people constructed social and spatial boundaries to maintain distance in response to pressures based on perceptions of crime and safety.
- *Collective social functioning* – Oxgangs, Wensley Fold and, to a certain extent, Amlwch and Hillside, were notable for closely knit networks of family and friends, nurtured over many years. The relative stability of these places provided for a shared history, and allowed the notion of a collective identity to emerge.

Social diversity

The extent to which the pattern of population change has helped to maintain shared spaces in the neighbourhoods emerged as a critical factor in the views of different social and ethnic groups in the localities. This underlined the importance of retaining such public spaces and amenities in areas experiencing decline or out-migration.

Across the neighbourhoods there were different experiences of social mix. In Hillside, people generally considered the consequences of displacement and dispersal – which predated but were accelerated by a major regeneration programme – to have been detrimental to maintaining local social networks. People in Oxgangs referred to conflicts between locals and newcomers competing for access to existing social housing, but this did not extend to the new development taking place. In Wensley Fold, the renaissance of the area was reflected in more positive views about its heterogeneity and fewer signs of conflict among different groups, though this was often nuanced by reference to separate communities in the neighbourhood.

The two areas that had experienced relatively modest interventions without an explicit objective to promote more mixed communities – Wensley Fold and Oxgangs – seemed to be undergoing a relatively stable transition to greater neighbourhood diversity (on certain measures) without overt divisions among different groups. In contrast, Hillside, which has had many interventions to promote greater diversity of tenure and income, was marked by increasing fragmentation and division. Also, West Kensington, ostensibly the most mixed community on several counts, was facing displacement and upheaval to meet the local authority's stated aim of producing more 'mixed and balanced communities'.

Conclusion

There was little evidence in the research of any fault line between 'cohesive' and 'broken' communities, of places somehow set apart from 'the rest of us'. Place still matters and, as a rule, neighbourhood mattered most to people where both the economic legacy and future prospects for their community were *least* favourable. The nature of the housing market was also important – neighbourhoods with a higher proportion of social housing often provided households with an island of stability in an ocean of turbulence (not least in the jobs market). Recent initiatives such as neighbourhood planning may be appropriate so that future measures can be fashioned to the specific processes of change, but many of the additional resources for these areas are themselves going to be locally generated and the pay-off here for communities with slack housing and labour markets will be very limited.

Many households in these six areas, especially those with children or other vulnerable family members, are time-poor as well as income-poor so that any exhortations to give more time in order to stimulate the 'Big Society' are likely to fall on deaf ears. A key question is what happens to those communities that are facing structural economic weakness but where countervailing systems of mutual support and resilience have also become attenuated over time – those at the end of the economic line – if the opportunities for economic growth lie elsewhere. The need to think radically about the fate of those areas facing long-run decline and entrenched poverty has been pressed before, but the political ramifications of either option (sustained public investment to stimulate the local economy, or an acceptance of growing residualisation and decay) seem equally unpalatable.

About the project

The project was undertaken by a research team from CRESR at Sheffield Hallam University, under the leadership of Professor Ian Cole. The methods used reflected growing interest in mapping the qualitative experiences of local 'geographies of poverty' to complement the more usual statistically based measures of local deprivation. Most of the data was drawn from three waves of in-depth interviews, supplemented by diaries and focus groups. The project also made an audio-visual record of responses to social, economic and demographic change.

For further information

The policy implications report, **Low-income neighbourhoods in Britain – the gap between policy ideas and residents' realities** by Ian Cole, Elaine Batty and Stephen Green, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

The overarching research report, **Living through challenges in deprived neighbourhoods: change, continuity, contrast**, plus 15 detailed research papers and extensive audio-visual material generated by the project are available at: http://research.shu.ac.uk/cresr/living-through-change/index.html

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