Older People in Deprived Neighbourhoods: Social Exclusion and Quality of Life in Old Age

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This research examined the circumstances of older people living in socially deprived areas of three English cities. In seeking to provide new insights into the nature of inequalities within older age, the study addressed the conditions of social exclusion in deprived urban neighbourhoods and the processes that contribute to social exclusion in later life.

The focus on older people in deprived neighbourhoods is closely tied to contemporary public policy concerns. In recent years, such neighbourhoods have been subject to considerable social policy intervention, linked to attempts to reduce the geographical divide between Britain's most deprived areas and the 'mainstream of society'. In this respect, the research sought to examine the degree to which residence in an area of concentrated poverty might compound the impact on older people of other forms of social exclusion, and lead to a diminished quality of life.

The research was undertaken in the three most deprived electoral wards in Liverpool, Manchester and the London Borough of Newham. Data collection consisted of a survey of 600 people aged 60 and over in the three cities, and semi-structured interviews with 130 people in the same age group.

Summary of key findings

The study highlighted the multiple risks of social exclusion faced by older people in deprived areas, showing that that these risks are significantly higher than in other areas of Britain:

- Poverty affects nearly half of people aged 60 and over in deprived urban neighbourhoods.
- Older people living in deprived areas of England are at least twice as likely to experience poverty as those in Britain as a whole.
- More than one in ten older people in this study found it difficult or very difficult to manage on their current incomes – almost half of older people in poverty said they had gone without buying clothes in the previous year. Fifteen per cent of this group had occasionally gone without buying food. Half of those in poverty had gone without a holiday.
- Close to one in ten older people in poverty have lived in poverty for most of their lives.
- A significant minority of older people in deprived areas could be described as being socially isolated and/or severely lonely. Around one fifth were socially isolated, while one in seven were severely lonely.
- Older people were found to be disproportionately vulnerable to serious crime. Very few of them said they would feel safe when leaving their home after dark.
- Many older people could be considered to be excluded from involvement in formal social relationships within their communities. Around one quarter were
completely disengaged from participation in civic activities.

Despite concerns about the physical appearance of their neighbourhood, and the presence of a range of social problems, most older people in deprived neighbourhoods display a considerable degree of attachment to their local areas.

Social exclusion of older people in deprived areas

The research sought to address five different forms of social exclusion that were judged relevant to the circumstances of older people:

- exclusion from material resources;
- exclusion from social relations;
- exclusion from civic activities;
- exclusion from basic services;
- neighbourhood exclusion.

Exclusion from material resources was examined in relation to deprivation and poverty.

**Deprivation:** Using a measure of multiple deprivation, the research found 60 per cent of respondents to be experiencing medium or high levels of deprivation. A heightened risk of deprivation was faced by women, respondents aged 75 and over, those living alone, and older Pakistani and Somali people. Comparison of these findings with General Household Survey data suggests that older people in deprived communities experience a disproportionate and intense degree of multiple deprivation.

**Poverty:** The research identified as poor those respondents who said they were unable to afford what the majority of British people view as basic necessities. The study drew on the results of a national survey which highlighted a range of items and activities regarded by 50 per cent or more of people as being necessities of daily living. People lacking two or more items because they couldn't afford them were judged to be in poverty. In this study, 45 per cent of respondents were found to be living in poverty. Some older people lacked and could not afford a substantial number of necessities. Seven per cent were unable to afford 11 or more of the 26 listed items. Poverty was particularly pronounced for older people belonging to some minority ethnic groups. Around three-quarters of older Somali people and two-thirds of older Pakistani people were in poverty. Comparison of these findings with national data suggests that older people in deprived areas are at least twice as likely to experience poverty as those in Britain as a whole.

Exclusion from social relations was assessed with reference to indicators of social isolation, loneliness and non-participation in common social activities.

**Social isolation** examined individuals' availability of and the frequency of contacts with family, friends and neighbours. While four-fifths of respondents were judged to experience no or low levels of isolation, one-fifth were judged to be socially isolated.

**Loneliness** was measured using the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale. This identified 40 per cent of respondents as not lonely and 44 per cent as moderately lonely. Sixteen per cent experienced either severe or very severe loneliness. Comparison with other studies that have used the same measurement instrument, and with research using different measures, suggests that older people in deprived areas experience a heightened risk of loneliness.

**Non-participation in common social activities** encompasses seven activities perceived as necessities by a majority of the adult population. Almost two-thirds of respondents were not excluded from any activities on the grounds of lack of affordability, and 18 per cent were excluded from just one activity. However, 17 per cent could not afford to participate in two or more common activities.

Exclusion from civic activities was measured by examining two forms of civic involvement:

**Attendance of meetings:** Forty-two per cent of respondents attended religious meetings at least once a year, and 33 per cent attended meetings of community groups. However, just under half of respondents never attended either type of meeting.

**Civic engagement:** Respondents were asked whether they had undertaken any of 11 different types of civic activities in the previous three years. Around three-quarters had undertaken at least one type of activity. However, 24 per cent had not participated in any of the listed activities.

Exclusion from basic services was assessed through two measures:

**In the home,** the overwhelming majority of older people had access to basic utilities (gas, electric-
ity, water and telephone). However, a significant minority cut back on using these services in order to make ends meet. Fourteen per cent had used less of three or four basic services in the five years preceding interview.

**Beyond the home**, an indicator of service exclusion was derived from the non-usage in the previous year of three key services: a post office, a chemist, and a bus service. Overall, 72 per cent of respondents had used all three services at least once and 18 per cent had used two of the services. The remaining 10 per cent had failed to use at least two of these key services.

**Neighbourhood exclusion** reflects the distinctive contribution of environmental factors to social exclusion, and was addressed by examining individuals' perceptions of their neighbourhoods, and their feelings of security in the neighbourhood.

**Perceptions of the neighbourhood**: Older people in this study were particularly concerned about the physical appearance of their neighbourhoods, the social problems that accompany profound socio-economic change, and the absence of amenities and services that can meet their needs. Nevertheless, many displayed a considerable degree of attachment to their local areas. Three-quarters of older people could identify something that they liked about their neighbourhood, while just under three-fifths identified something that they disliked. Combining responses to three questions relating to the neighbourhood, 10 per cent of respondents expressed very negative views about their neighbourhood on at least two questions.

**Neighbourhood security**: Those who regard their neighbourhood as unsafe or a place where they might be vulnerable to crime may be restricted in their ability to participate in important social roles. In this study, 40 per cent of respondents had been the victim of one or more type of crime in the two years preceding interview. In this context, it is understandable that just 7 per cent of respondents suggested that they would feel very safe when leaving the home after dark. By contrast, 44 per cent reported that they would feel very unsafe in this situation.

The research suggests that significant numbers of older people in deprived urban areas are prone to different dimensions of social exclusion. Drawing the findings together, a considerable proportion of older people were found to experience at least one of the five forms of social exclusion that were examined. The study population divided into three groups:

- A first group, comprising 30 per cent of respondents, were not excluded on any of the five domains;
- A second group, representing 31 per cent of the sample, experienced exclusion on a single domain;
- A third group was numerically the largest, comprising almost two-fifths of respondents (39 per cent) who were prone to the cumulative impact of multiple forms of exclusion.

The experience of multiple exclusion was significantly linked to age and ethnicity. People aged 75 and over were more likely to be multiply excluded than those aged 60-74 years. Respondents of Indian and Black Caribbean origin were much less likely to experience exclusion than Somali and Pakistani older people. Four out of five Somali respondents (80 per cent) and just over half of Pakistani respondents (52 per cent) were excluded on two or more domains.

**Social exclusion and quality of life**

A focus of the research was to explore interactions between social exclusion and quality of life for older people living in socially deprived urban areas. Given that older people in deprived neighbourhoods are prone to different and multiple types of exclusion, the question arises of the degree to which this impacts upon quality of life. The research examined the relationship between a standard measure of quality of life and a summary measure of social exclusion. Not surprisingly, this analysis showed that older people who rate their quality of life as good or very good are significantly less likely to experience social exclusion than those rating their quality of life as poor or very poor. Put another way, the research found that the condition of social exclusion acts to reduce significantly older people’s quality of life.

**Policy implications**

These findings present an important challenge to policy makers. There is a need for contemporary urban and social policy to consider the position of older people in deprived areas in terms of their potential vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion. A key task facing policy makers is to develop appropriate policies that take account of the multiple risks experienced by older people in deprived neigh-
bourhoods and to address their specific needs. Policies that succeed in reducing social exclusion in its different forms have the potential to significantly enhance older people's quality of life.

About the study

The research was undertaken in the three English local authorities that ranked lowest on the 1998 Index of Local Deprivation. These were Liverpool, Manchester and the London Borough of Newham. To account for variation in relation to the spread and intensity of deprivation, the research focused on the three most deprived electoral wards in each city.

Two main phases of data collection took place:

- A questionnaire survey, based on face-to-face interviews with 600 people aged 60 and over was conducted. Recruitment of participants occurred in two ways. A first group of 501 people was randomly selected through local electoral registers. A second group of 99 respondents was recruited from the largest minority ethnic group in each electoral ward. The survey collected both socio-demographic data about the circumstances of older people living in deprived areas and detailed information relating to the themes of social exclusion and quality of life.

- Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 130 older people living in the same electoral wards. Ninety interviews were completed with people who had previously taken part in the survey, and had consented to be contacted again. Further interviews were undertaken with 20 older Somali people in Liverpool and 20 older Pakistani people in Manchester. The in-depth interviews explored such issues as older people's experiences of daily life, strategies for survival in urban areas, the management of household finances, and the types of social relationships in which they were engaged. The interviews allowed the research group to explore the meaning of quality of life from the perspective of older people, and to address variations in the experiences of sub-groups within the older population.

Publications


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