

→ DOES GIVING RESIDENTS CONTROL OVER DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR NEIGHBOURHOODS IMPROVE THEIR HEALTH?



NIHR SPHR's unique research programme explores whether increased community control can enhance health and influence its social determinants in low income neighbourhoods. The findings could be of national and international significance.

We're in charge," declares Linda, a resident in one of Britain's more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. She's delighted that residents in her area have been given £1 million to spend as they see fit to make their neighbourhood a better place to live. They are also being offered support to develop the skills and confidence they need to make these decisions. "As a community, if you are from the sort of area where you are seen as needy....," says Linda. "You are never in charge." Linda's tale recalls Mark Twain's famous short story, "The Million Pound Note". A penniless man is given the single banknote for a month by eccentric twin brothers. One brother secretly wagers that the banknote will enable its possessor to achieve whatever he needs, without ever spending it. That brother wins the bet: the once poor man has no trouble getting food, clothes or a hotel suite, never spending a penny. Exclusive social groups welcome him - he is even asked to back a business venture. All thanks to the empowerment that the unused banknote brings.

More than a century on, Mark Twain's fantasy is now being put to a different, more modern test by a team of researchers from the NIHR School for Public Health Research (NIHR SPHR). People living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods live around seven years less on average than those living in better off areas. They also have more chronic illness.

Could community control over financial resources, plus support to develop skills and confidence, lead to improvements in health and well-being? Could this shift ultimately lead to longer lives? That's the question explored by NIHR SPHR's "Communities in Control" study of some of the areas granted £1m each by the Big Local.

The study, involving researchers from the universities of Durham, Exeter, Lancaster, Liverpool, Sheffield and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine could have a major impact on public health policy both here in Britain and internationally. It could provide much needed evidence on whether community empowerment helps people living in disadvantaged circumstances to live the longer, healthier lives enjoyed by better off groups.

There is considerable evidence, particularly from Scandinavian workplace research, suggesting that greater individual control of one's life is good for health. However, the data is much patchier on whether collective control by groups of people is also associated with better health. Some intriguing evidence comes from British Columbia in Canada. There, social psychologists have established that enhanced community empowerment seems to be associated with lower levels of teenage suicide rates among some of the country's indigenous "First Nation" peoples. Researchers found that rates among six First Nations in British Columbia varied considerably and, in some, were no higher than for other Canadians. The First Nations with lower suicide rates among their young people were those that were culturally empowered – for example, they had successfully reclaimed their ancestral lands and gained control over their schools and education.



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Professor Jennie Popay



NIHR SPHR's study offers an important opportunity to help fill this knowledge gap and contribute to more effective public policy in this field, explains Jennie Popay, Professor of Sociology and Public Health at Lancaster University and co-ordinator of NIHR SPHR's research programme into the impact of Big Local on health and its social determinants.

"For nearly 20 years," says Professor Popay, who is also NIHR SPHR Deputy Director, "successive governments have championed community empowerment. David Cameron's Big Society and Tony Blair's New Deal shared ambitions to galvanise the potential of local people working effectively together to improve their lives. Yet, despite this longstanding, cross-party vision, surprisingly little is known about whether community empowerment improves health and well-being. We aim to help answer that question."

It is, however, early days. Many Big Local areas are just getting going, working out their agendas and ways to work together. It is too soon to assess health benefits for communities living in these neighbourhoods. Also, in the complicated world of area-based initiatives, the NIHR SPHR researchers are initially developing ways to evaluate the outcomes. "Our approach is relatively new in this field," explains Professor Popay. "Public health research typically tries to isolate the signal from the noise, to identify a single cause. Here, however, we are taking a systems approach, asking 'what happens' in neighbourhoods when Big Local is introduced, what positive or negative ripples are generated by Big Local, how do they interact with other changes and what processes amplify or dampen down these ripples.

"Public involvement is not as well developed in public health research as it is, for example, in health services research. Here we are also being innovative, involving Big Local residents and people involved in supporting them, particularly Local Trust, the national organisation that oversees the programme."

For Linda, the research process has been a good experience, so far. "Oh it's much better than I expected," she explains. "I thought I would get a big form emailed to me and spend many happy hours filling it in but it's been great to actually talk to people. It has been informal and very human. It's been really enjoyable. It will encourage other people to get involved, particularly young people."

Professor Popay adds: "This study could illuminate the processes that are more or less empowering, how positive impacts can be maximised and negative impacts avoided that will improve the effectiveness of community based initiatives around the country."

Linda welcomes research into her community. "There is this internalised sense of 'Oh, it will never really be any good and it doesn't matter what you do,' kind of thing. Of course it matters what you do; we are not cursed; we're just poor; it's different and so I think, if there's research going on that looks at the way things develop, that will be a really good kind of objective thing to refer to, so people can look at what's happened and say, 'Well, oh yeah, well that's changed and that's changed and, if that can change, other things can change as well'."

If academics can link greater control with being healthier, that's a big tick...

"Sometimes, people are concerned about living somewhere safe, having access to jobs, education. They might want places for young people to go, activities for older people in the community. In one area, people are limited in the jobs they can take because public transport is poor and they can't actually get to work. They might look at community transport or moped-hire schemes so they can get to work.

"Sometimes, what comes across is a desire to get on with their neighbours, feel it is a better place to live. People want community activities, festival fun days, small grants to community groups and charities in the area, building that feeling of a community. They need skills and confidence to identify the issues and to do something about it.

"I am hoping for positive findings. If academics can prove that there is this link between having greater control over what matters to you and you being healthier, that has to be a big tick. It will give confidence and inspiration to people. But we did not commission the research so we are a natural experiment. It might prove there is no link and it is not working.

"I have not seen any findings in advance. SPHR have shared with us publicly available data – benchmarking for the communities – regarding education, health and employment. So we learned a bit and the communities can access that as well. We now have that data by postcode which we did not have previously.

"I met a researcher at an event with members of the community. I did not realise she was a researcher at first. The relationship was positive and people liked her. They have slipped in nicely, understood what the community is doing. I like the way this group are working – sensitively and in line with our research. I don't feel they are wasting our time."



Debbie Ladds, Chief Executive of Local Trust, which administers Big Local.

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