Why community empowerment matters for health inequalities

- A lack of control over decisions that shape people’s lives may contribute to poorer health outcomes.

- The Communities in Control study is researching a Lottery funded initiative called Big Local, which puts decision making into the hands of residents across 150 areas in England.

- NIHR SPHR researchers are producing learning about how groups of residents work together to take action and influence change locally and the effects of this on their health and wellbeing.
Differences in the amount of control that communities have over circumstances in which they live may be a major cause of inequalities.

Key issues

- For many years, public health strategies have emphasised the role of communities taking action collectively to improve their circumstances and for people’s voices to be heard in the planning and delivery of local services.
- Little evidence is available about positive or negative health impacts of initiatives aiming to empower communities in this way.
- Traditional approaches to measuring health impact such as experimental designs are also unsuited to evaluating change in complex community initiatives.

What we did

Big Local is a major community initiative funded by the Big Lottery and managed by Local Trust. It is being rolled out in 150 areas in England over at least 10 years.

Phase 1 of the Communities in Control study focused on understanding Big Local’s early roll out. Phase 2 is using a systems approach to investigate changes in collective control and the health and social impacts of this. SPHR has also set up a resident network to support public involvement in the research.

Findings and implications

Phase 1 findings are available, covering a range of topics:

- How context (social relationships and histories) influences the ways that communities come together to take action.
- Early indicators of collective control and action by communities.
- Types of ‘spaces’ that emerge for decision making and involvement.
- Inclusion and participation in the initiative’s early stages.
- How funding enables communities to have a say about local needs.

What next?

Phase 2 findings will provide evidence of the ways that action by communities is achieving change in the social determinants of health inequalities in Big Local areas; by improving access to local services, improving social cohesion and access to green spaces, or by challenging area based stigma. The health and wellbeing impacts for directly engaged residents is also being examined.

References:


SPHR Contact/Find out more about this study at:

The Communities in Control study website includes links to research publications, briefings, videos and updates about how to get involved as a resident or professional. http://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/health-inequalities/home/

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