

Putting Health in its Place: Linking Evidence on Regeneration, Housing and Health

Conference on Friday 7 November 2003

at

Teacher Building, St Enoch Square, Glasgow G1 4DB

ABSTRACTS / SUMMARIES OF PAPERS PRESENTED (IN RUNNING ORDER)

Orientation – Health and Place

Sally Macintyre

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This orienting presentation will give a broad overview of how place might influence mental and physical health via a variety of mechanisms. It will argue that places perform a number of functions (physical, practical, social, and symbolic) and that housing and neighbourhoods have the potential to meet many human needs. We need to take a broad view of health promoting and health damaging features of local areas, and to develop better understandings of the causal links between the physical and social environment and health.

Health Impact of Housing Improvement Programmes: Using the Evidence

Hilary Thomson

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This paper presents the findings of a wide-ranging review of housing research, including a systematic review that evaluated the health impacts of housing improvements.

Very little research has been done to assess the health impacts of housing improvement. The research, which has been done, suggests that housing improvements may lead to small health improvements, in particular mental health improvement, although some negative health impacts were also reported. The research available is not sufficient to provide a full picture of the potential for large-scale investment in housing improvements to be part of a health improvement strategy.

Research reporting housing characteristics associated with poor health may be useful to suggest where housing improvements may be most likely to lead to health improvements. For example, measures to help provide affordable heat among the elderly may help reduce the excess winter deaths in the UK. In addition, housing improvements are often accompanied by other changes, which may exert a negative or positive health effect, e.g. rent increases, relocation, and neighbourhood improvement.

Drawing on this broader research base together with the findings of the systematic review of housing improvements, a framework has been developed. The framework consists of a list of questions addressing the most likely ways in which a housing improvement programme may impact on health and points to the need to consider the possibility of both positive or negative health impacts. The framework also includes background information on housing policy in Scotland and information on the process of Health Impact Assessment.

To obtain a full copy of this framework please contact:

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Giving Urban Policy its 'Medical': The Place of Health in Area-Based Regeneration Initiatives

Rowland Atkinson, Hilary Thomson, Ade Kearns and Mark Petticrew

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How does regeneration impact on health and how have successive urban policies sought to measure such impacts? This paper draws on a systematic review of national-level evaluation documentation relating to area-based regeneration initiatives in the UK since 1980. The review attempted to examine whether health impacts had been intended and looked at whether they had been measured. We also note that earlier programmes may also have had impacts, even where these were not measured. The process and difficulties of conducting the review also raise important questions about policy formulation and evaluation – is evidence-based policy possible where verification cannot be found? We suggest that this has an impact on the relative ability to respond to past lessons where indexing, storage and communication between tiers of programmes are inadequate. In short, a model of policy development as enlightened or incremental is hard to sustain – a lack of clear impacts in evaluation and the non-systematic storage of data and documents mean researchers, policy-makers and practitioners may struggle to produce answers to such important policy questions.

New Deal for Communities (NDC) Evaluation

Jean Peters

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Reducing inequalities in health is firmly on the Government's agenda. Specific targets have been set to increase life expectancy and reduce infant mortality in the most deprived populations. A number of programmes have been initiated over the past few years with the remit to reduce the widening health gap, such as Health Action Zones, Sure Start, and Healthy Living Centres. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit is currently considering the impact on deprived communities of inadequate housing and poor physical environment, poor skills, high crime rates, levels of poor health, high unemployment, and how each of these themes impact upon each other. Thirty-nine communities successfully bid to become New Deal Communities (NDCs) and to receive funding to develop and implement programmes to tackle local issues within these five themes. The health theme evaluation team have mapped the health-related areas of concern identified by each community. Areas of common concern across many of the 39 NDCs include reducing teenage pregnancy, supporting teenage parents, drug prevention and support, exercise, healthy eating, complementary therapies, improving mental health, and increasing access to NHS staff. As part of the evaluation we are exploring the relationship between the aims, objectives and outcomes of individual projects and programmes of work within the health theme and the factors that are contributing to the successful delivery and outcome or not of each project initiated.

Natural Experiments in Health and Neighbourhoods Research

Mark Petticrew

(University of Glasgow)

Policymakers have demanded better evidence of the effects of interventions on health inequalities, and have pointed to the relative absence of rigorous outcome evaluations. However there are particular problems with collecting such evidence, as many of the major social determinants of health are not amenable to randomisation for practical or political reasons; examples include new roads, new housing and area-based regeneration, all of which have been theorised to affect health inequalities. Recently health inequalities researchers have recommended that more use should be made of "natural" experiments (for example, changes in employment opportunities, or housing provision). Natural experiments are already an important source of evidence in observational epidemiology, and they have two further important contributions to make within the health inequalities agenda. Firstly, they can play an important role in investigating the determinants of health inequalities, and secondly

they can assist in the identification of effective interventions to improve health, an area where it is widely acknowledged that the evidence-base is currently sparsely populated. This paper discusses these issues, using some recent examples from the UK.

The Scottish Health, Housing and Regeneration Project: Evaluation Challenges

Caroline Hoy, Ade Kearns, Mark Petticrew, Catherine Ferrell, Kate Campbell
(University of Glasgow)

In the context of new and differing ways of evaluation this paper discusses the SHARP project: a quasi-experimental study which represents a step forward in health and housing research.

The paper discusses the general challenges arising during the implementation of experimental and quasi-experimental research projects. It develops suggestions about the ways in which these types of studies could be made easier for governments and funders to engage with should they become more interested in this valuable research methodology within the field of social policy.
