

Neighbourhood, social deprivation and mental health: the mediating role of social cohesion

Research Team

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Start date: March 2007

End date: August 2008

Funding: Elliott E, Williams G, Fone D. Neighbourhood, social deprivation and mental health: the mediating role of social cohesion. Wales Office of Research and Development in Health and Social Care (WORD)

The Study

This project, funded by the Welsh Office of Research and Development in Health and Social Care (WORD), is a partnership between researchers at CISHE, the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University and the Centre for Health Sciences Research. The study builds on survey work from the Caerphilly Health and Social Care Needs Survey, also funded by WORD, which collected cross-sectional health and neighbourhood related data from 12,092 respondents living in the borough. Professor David Fone, one of the co-applicants, was involved in leading this study. The primary findings from this study was first, that small area contextual 'neighbourhood' measures of income deprivation, social cohesion and economic inactivity are significant determinants of poor mental health. Secondly, income deprivation and social cohesion measured at small area level are significantly and independently associated with poor mental health status, and the findings suggest effect modification of the association between poor mental health and area income deprivation by high social cohesion. This confirms other studies that highlight the role that cohesive communities play in protecting health and adds force to the argument that it has an important role in tackling inequalities.

However although the measures used in the study established this relationship, little is known about what social cohesion means to different population groups in different areas, and how it operates in counteracting the most damaging effects of poverty, particularly through periods of social and economic change. Insight into these processes provides opportunities to develop testable interventions that could improve mental health through enhancing social cohesion. In order to develop and refine our understanding of the processes underlying these statistical findings, a more fine-grained approach is necessary. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the meaning and significance of these findings and develop better explanations for the processes underlying these associations.

The aim of the research is to investigate the processes through which social cohesion moderates the impact of deprivation on mental health and identify potential interventions to improve social cohesion and mental health. The study will take place

in four areas, two affluent (high and low cohesion) and two deprived (high and low cohesion) within Caerphilly County Borough Council drawing on the Caerphilly Health and Social Needs Study. A combination of in-depth interviews and participatory mapping techniques will be used to explore the views and experiences of different population groups in relationship to neighbourhood qualities and resources in different areas.

The need for actions to strengthen the role of communities in preventing ill health and creating and sustaining health is stressed in both Designed for Life and the Wanless Review of Health and Social Care in Wales. One outcome of this study will be to suggest actions that national and local governments could take to improve the qualities of neighbourhoods for residents in ways that are likely to improve mental health.

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