

Recession and cohesion in Bradford

Findings
Informing change

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Through discussions with local people, this study explored the links between poverty and community relationships in Bradford. What are the implications of the recession and spending cuts for community relationships?

Key points

- There was widespread anxiety among statutory and voluntary sector spokespeople, and also some residents, about spending cuts:
 - statutory workers worried about the impact on services such as housing and unemployment support;
 - stakeholders and local people experienced feelings of uncertainty around discussion of local authority austerity packages;
 - people feared that the cuts would worsen long-standing deprivation and reduce community funding; and
 - voluntary sector spokespeople were concerned that there is a potential conflict between cuts and the community empowerment and voluntary sector activity that the 'Big Society' is meant to place centre stage.
- Voluntary sector participants stressed that resources were critical for essential work with hidden and disadvantaged communities. This included the socially segregated Gypsy and Traveller and migrant worker communities.
- Unemployment negatively affected relationships with ethnic minority groups, fostering a victim-blaming culture that prevented cohesion. Communities feared for the job prospects of younger people, and this reinforced resentment towards migrants, who were seen to be taking jobs. However, migrants were also losing jobs and experiencing hardship. Further deprivation is likely to fuel this victim-blaming culture.
- Young people felt disenfranchised. Worries about ongoing deprivation, unemployment and the disaffection of some young people in Bradford superseded concerns about the recession. All participants felt that the recession had made pre-recession problems worse.
- Overall, Bradford residents were pessimistic about the long-term impact of recession and cuts, but more positively they agreed that everyone has responsibility for community relationships and cohesion.

The research

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Background

This study aimed to improve understanding of the implications of recession and poverty for community relationships in Bradford. Recent neighbourhood studies have provided evidence about how deprivation and the way in which people connect is important to social cohesion. They suggest that material inequalities can have a negative impact on community relationships. For this study researchers spoke to local people about poverty and community relationships.

Sustaining healthy community relationships

There was widespread anxiety among statutory and voluntary sector interviewees, as well as some residents, about the climate of spending cuts. In a climate of uncertainty about the scale of the cuts, there was also pessimism about the impact on deprivation and community funding. Community funding had been fixed (and so in effect losing value) for several years. People from the voluntary sector described efforts to support it as piecemeal and lacking connectivity, expressing concern about communication with the council. This fuelled uncertainty and anxiety about the implications of anticipated spending cuts, including for those sections of the community worst affected by recession.

My biggest concern ... around this recession is where are we going to get funding to actually continue to support the communities, they're actually going through the worst of the recession ... I think the danger is we're called the voluntary and community sector so people think we do it for nothing. (Community worker)

Voluntary sector participants stressed that resources were essential for facilitating essential work with hidden and disadvantaged communities. This included the socially segregated Gypsy and Traveller and migrant worker communities. Community workers emphasised that strong communities need a resilient community infrastructure, which includes community organisations. It was felt that established communities should not be neglected.

... I can think of lots of estates in Bradford where people don't feel cared for, they don't feel cared for and they therefore don't care about other people. (Unemployed participant)

Community and cohesion

Bradford residents thought about community in a number of ways, including local neighbourhoods working together and sharing something together, tolerance, caring and looking out for others and friendship networks. Various Bradford communities resented how the area and its residents had become stigmatised by the 2001 riots. This demonstrated a desire to claim back their community identity and cast off stereotypes.

When asked what the term 'cohesion' means, the key informants interviewed talked of fairness and equality, shared values and interests, interdependence and neighbourliness, involvement and integration, and working together but accepting difference. They often attributed positive characteristics to the term 'cohesion', and it could in many instances be used interchangeably with the term 'community'. However, there was an underlying tension over what the term had come to mean and represent in a policy context.

Young people and community relationships

For Bradford residents, longstanding issues around deprivation, unemployment and the disaffection of young people in Bradford were more prominent than concerns about the current impact of recession. In discussing the short-term impacts of the recession at the levels of the area, individual and household, all residents felt that the recession had made pre-recession problems worse, reinforcing longstanding problems. Recession had intensified signs of area decline, for example the closure of shops. It was also perceived to have increased unemployment, material hardship and family tensions.

Unemployed youth were linked with crime and anti-social behaviour and tensions in relationships between older and younger people. A lack of work opportunities and recreational spaces left many feeling alienated and there were concerns that young people from different ethnic groups were not mixing.

I see young people in their twenties living in really quite segregated communities and I also hear, I don't see it but I hear about a lot of violence and they are the next generation.
(Unemployed resident)

Inter-ethnic conflict

Much everyday community conflict was routine, for example related to noise and nuisance. However, established Bradford residents' accounts of the impact of recession suggested that unemployment and the lack of work opportunities were fuelling resentment towards new arrivals to the area. There were tensions among young people, whose greatest concern seemed to be the lack of jobs. The new arrivals, notably Eastern Europeans, were seen to be taking jobs that might otherwise go to established residents. However, migrant workers were also losing jobs and struggling to survive. Residents also felt perceptions that the labelling of Muslims as extremists, and related hostility had worsened during the recession.

While the lack of jobs did not help community well-being, the impact of the recession had not been negative across all ethnic communities. Some communities had very close family ties and described how they felt very resilient in times of difficulty. Some residents spoke about finding social and financial support through hard times from within their own ethnic community as well as community organisations, emphasising the value of these structures of support to individual and community well-being.

Conclusions: bringing residents together for healthy community relationships

Joined-up working to support youth employment, fostered under the Future Jobs Fund, needs to be built on. A youth unemployment pilot project should be developed to engage local young people and provide urgently needed employment. Several creative approaches have been used during the community funding squeeze to try and develop a sustainable community infrastructure, and alternative ways of working may help maintain and strengthen local resilience by building on community partnerships. Such increased co-operation might integrate the voices of hidden and disadvantaged communities. Community mediation agencies need to explore the scope for volunteers to have a greater role in preventing community disputes and tensions from escalating in the difficult financial and economic climate.

The research team came across examples of creative thinking in cohesion-related initiatives. Ongoing evaluation of the costs and benefits of such initiatives, supporting the sharing of good practice, will help achieve recognition of their value as a lever for bringing communities together. Service providers could do more to communicate policies and initiatives to Bradford residents to make them aware of myths, as well as harsh realities, around the distribution of resources, recognising the role of the press and media and the need for good news stories and positive messages. Greater co-ordination of this activity across service providers would be helpful, and the development of a communications tool-kit might support this process.

Given voluntary-sector concerns about communicating with statutory providers, there needs to be ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of new structures for engaging with the voluntary sector and the representation of and engagement with more groups whose voice might not usually be heard. Continued efforts to tackle disadvantage, discrimination and poverty traps are needed. Bradford Council has introduced a range of measures to tackle economic hardship. These interventions need to be prioritised despite the climate of spending cuts, and efforts at developing joined up working need to be intensified. Youth unemployment, alienation and segregation needs to be addressed.

About the project

The study used qualitative research methods between February and June 2010 to explore resident and community and voluntary sector views on the impact of recession on life and community relationships in Bradford. The research team undertook ten discussion groups to explore residents' views, placing emphasis on the involvement of 'hidden voices'. Participants included, for example, Eastern European migrants, Gypsies and Travellers, the unemployed, older Asian men and women and young white working-class and Asian people. A deliberative workshop was used to foster service provider discussion of residents' views. In addition, interviews were undertaken with a range of key informant service providers and voluntary sector organisations.

For further information

The full report, **Recession and cohesion in Bradford** by Maria Hudson, Rosemary Davidson, Lucia Durante, Jemma Grieve and Arjumand Kazmi, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

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