

Social cohesion in diverse communities

Findings
Informing change

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This study explores relationships between new and established communities in two ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, drawing on discussion groups and one-to-one interviews with 60 ordinary residents from white British, Somali, black Caribbean and multiple-heritage backgrounds.

Key points

- Deprivation and disadvantage played a pivotal role in neighbourhood relationships:
 - Racial tensions were often driven by struggles for resources such as employment and housing.
 - Respondents talked about the ‘unfairness’ of resource allocation.
- Inter-generational tensions reduced social cohesion as older residents often referred to a lack of respect by young people and saw young people’s relationships as the cause of ethnic tensions. In fact, young people’s changing alliances and divisions were shaped by gender and poverty issues.
- The nature and extent of residents’ social interactions were wide-ranging:
 - Younger people and those who had been in the neighbourhood longer were more likely to have mixed social networks.
 - The more recently arrived Somalis tended to have fewer social connections with other ethnic groups.
 - Generally, individuals’ social interactions were shaped by many factors, including age, gender, life course and migration history as well as ethnicity.
- Sports, music and employment enabled interactions across communities, while barriers to cohesion included language issues, perceptions of cultural difference and stereotyping, unemployment, fear of crime and racial harassment.
- Population turnover made it difficult for service providers to give appropriate support and could contribute to people feeling negative about their neighbourhood.
- A sense of community was identified only in small pockets within the neighbourhoods, often where populations were the most stable.
- People’s sense of belonging to their local neighbourhood resulted from a complex mix of emotional and material factors. Many felt emotionally attached to the neighbourhood, but also drawn to other areas that seemed to offer a better environment for families and greater chances for social mobility.

The research

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Background

Investigations into the 2001 disturbances in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford suggested that tensions among different ethnic groups were a key factor. In this context, community relationships have come under greater scrutiny, with particular emphasis on the role of ethnicity and race. Social interactions and relationships in diverse neighbourhoods, particularly where there is some residential segregation, have been presented as a 'problem'. There has also been heavy policy emphasis on the need to promote social (and community) cohesion.

For this study, the research team explored the nature and quality of community interactions and relationships in local neighbourhoods in two different parts of the country: North Tottenham in London and Moss Side in Manchester. The research explored a variety of themes with ordinary residents from established communities (white British, black Caribbean and multiple-heritage) and relatively new arrivals (Somalis). These themes included their residential history, social networks and interactions, what it was like to live in the area, their sense of belonging and understanding of community and their experience of local services. The respondents lived in areas facing issues of poverty, deprivation, persistent unemployment, crime and anti-social behaviour. Service providers have introduced a range of initiatives to tackle inequality and social exclusion.

Everyday social interactions

In the main, there was greater social interaction between black Caribbean and white British residents than occurred in the past, but more limited social interaction between these communities and the more recently-arrived Somalis. People's everyday interactions were influenced by a range of factors, including age, gender, stage of life and migration history, as well as ethnicity and religion. Younger people and those who had been in the neighbourhood (or country) for longer were more likely to have more mixed social networks.

"When I was younger I had white friends and we wouldn't be allowed to go round their house, their parents didn't really like black people, but now it's like, you know, they're more accepted, that's what they see every day, they see black people every day now."
(Young black Caribbean woman, Tottenham)

Somalis' interactions with the broader community were also influenced strongly by gender. Recently-arrived

Somali women with children and English language needs tended to be more restricted in their activities than men.

Sports, music and employment all provided sites for interactions across communities, while barriers included language issues, perceptions of cultural difference and stereotyping, unemployment (preventing workplace mixing) and fears of crime or racial harassment. Somalis felt increasingly uncomfortable amid a growth in racial harassment. Some felt that this was fuelled by the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11) and 7 July 2005 (7/7), exacerbated by associations between Muslims and terrorism in the media.

"Here Muslims are perceived to be terrorists, this is after the September 11 ... Muslims are not terrorists, Muslims do not condone terrorism or violence, but unfortunately there is nothing they can do about it because it is the media that is stereotyping it."
(Somali man, Moss Side)

"... half these terrorists are Somalians ...".
(White British woman, Moss Side)

Some residents took part in a wide variety of activities. Those crossing ethnic boundaries included women from both new and established communities doing voluntary work for local childcare and parenting projects, and older men and women from established communities attending tenants and residents' associations. In addition, activity by faith organisations has led to opportunities for new and established communities to interact, for example in cross-community dialogue after 9/11 and 7/7.

Material inequality and neighbourhood relationships

"I was homeless for a long time, 18 months with two children, I was pregnant ... I live in hostel, and then live after that with my [relative], her house is two bedrooms and overcrowding, she got four children herself ...".
(Somali woman, Moss Side)

Many residents were very positive about living in a diverse neighbourhood in terms of the benefits of learning about other cultures and reducing fear of people from different cultural backgrounds. While tensions among residents in the neighbourhoods commonly took a racial form, they were mostly driven by struggles for resources such as employment and housing. People's perception of the 'unfairness' of the distribution or allocation of such resources pervaded many accounts. Residents of different ethnicities felt that new arrivals received more favourable treatment from service providers. Their perceptions often belied the hardships experienced by these newly-arrived groups.

Although struggles over resources did not inevitably result in hostility towards groups seen to be culturally different, it is likely that the relative lack of interaction between new communities and others have exacerbated such feelings. The media have also played a role in fuelling negative attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers. This was reflected in the common sentiment that those who did not contribute economically were 'first in the queue' for state resources. Residents' accounts implied that people were not simply repeating media stories about asylum seekers, but incorporating these ideas into their everyday lives and understanding of their local situation.

Several representatives from service providers and community and voluntary organisations described how regeneration was making a difference to local contexts. However, many of them were aware of local conflict over resources and emphasised that poverty and inequalities in wealth were an important dynamic in social cohesion. They argued that communities with fewer economic and social resources were less likely to be able to cope successfully with an influx of new (culturally distinct) communities. Moves to give mixed rather than separate service provision for different ethnic communities were partly due to constrained resources and met with some resistance.

Relationships between older and younger people

"... in the past I used to call out to 'em, one o'clock in the morning, I was like, 'Look, do you mind moving? Or just keep it down?' Oh, well, the language you got, and they shout all the more!"
(Pensioner, Tottenham)

"The respect and everything: all that has gone out of the window, you know children no longer have regard for anyone."
(Mother, Moss Side)

Tensions in the neighbourhoods did not only run along ethnic lines. Inter-generational tensions and age-related divisions were particularly prominent in both areas. Some respondents' accounts of 'slipping social standards' were not only applied to new communities, but also to young people of all communities. Age-related social divisions were particularly prominent as a factor working against social cohesion. However, younger and older people in both areas expressed concerns about the unfairness of their area's reputations in terms of crime and how this might contribute to the negative labelling of residents.

The association between ethnicity and age was also important. Many of those interviewed thought young people's relationships were at the forefront of neighbourhood ethnic tensions. However, the diverse

Text box 1: Hideaway youth project

Hideaway has worked in Moss Side since 1966 to provide education and activities in the community for children and young people. Its projects have included one for young people excluded from school and one for 16 to 19 year olds not in education, employment or training, providing positive routes back into education. A current project works with Somali and black Caribbean young men, diverting them from drugs, crime and gangs by using football and sport to engage them. The project is designed to build cross-community connections.

accounts of participants suggested a changing pattern of divisions and alliances among young people of different ethnic groups, with gender and issues of poverty influencing the nature of relationships.

Residential stability and community spirit

Service providers spoke of how new communities were arriving on an unplanned basis and, particularly in Tottenham, compounding issues of overcrowding. This made it more difficult for providers to give appropriate support to new as well as established communities.

Many residents aspired to have more 'sense of community' in their neighbourhoods, and there was a pervasive feeling that the neighbourhood ought to be a community. A common story among older residents was the decline of the tight-knit communities that had existed in the past. While idealising the past, this also reflected labour and housing market changes that have led to increased turnover in local populations. A sense of community tended to be identified only in small pockets within the neighbourhoods. Residents identified and interacted with a multitude of small communities, based around a small group of streets or a few blocks on an estate, often where populations were the most stable.

"I think at times there can be quite a community spirit within Tottenham, but it's obviously just the area I live in."
(Multiple-heritage woman, Tottenham)

A complex mix of emotional and material factors informed residents' attachment to their local neighbourhood and their plans to stay or leave. Residents widely cited crime, noise and lack of opportunities as 'push' factors for leaving, and social ties as 'pull' factors for staying. However, individuals weighed up these factors differently, with age and life stage playing a significant role. Many expressed ambivalent attitudes because they were emotionally attached to the neighbourhood, but drawn to greater opportunities elsewhere.

Text box 2: Living Under One Sun project

This project, based in Tottenham, encourages children and families from different cultural backgrounds to meet through the medium of cooking and sharing food. Neighbours from different communities have been brought into contact with each other, and the project has facilitated women's involvement in training sessions in food hygiene, first aid and children's face painting. It is hoped that they can use these skills in community events, which may eventually lead to paid employment. The project has engaged with Kosovan, Albanian, Turkish, Kurdish, Latin American, Somali and West African communities. A challenge is to get established black Caribbean and white British families involved.

"Out of the residents when I came here 25 years ago, there's probably only three families left, four families left."

(White British man, Moss Side)

While many respondents cited ethnic diversity in the neighbourhood as a barrier to a broader sense of community, the reality was more complex. A person's age, stage of life and length of time in the neighbourhood cut across ethnic identity and could promote attachments to the neighbourhood and local community. There was some concern that a fear of 'losing culture' among Somalis was inhibiting their interactions with others, but there was also evidence of a wider range of identities among second-generation Somalis. Across the sample, the range of ethnic, cultural and religious attachments expressed did not prevent people from identifying with the local area or community participation.

"Tottenham is my home, it is where I live and I am happy here. I feel that I belong to Somalia but I like here too."

(Somali man, Tottenham)

Conclusion

- To promote social cohesion, this research has shown the need to engage with established as well as new communities. More institutional responses are required to tackle the social divisions that work against cohesion.
- Local grassroots projects can make an important contribution in facilitating connections between different groups, for example older and younger people, and young people and women from different ethnic backgrounds (see text boxes 1 and 2 for examples). This helps to foster positive engagement and relationships.
- Service providers and community and voluntary organisations would benefit from more multi-agency working, for example between Jobcentre Plus, the health sector, local councils and police forces.
- The analysis of social cohesion in our two case study areas reinforces the importance of the twin elements of social cohesion: eroding disparities, inequalities and social exclusion on the one hand, and nurturing the social infrastructure of neighbourhoods, social relations, interactions and ties on the other.

About the project

The study used qualitative research methods in two ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, Moss Side in Manchester and North Tottenham in North London (Haringey) from March 2005 to February 2006, to explore residents' experiences and relationships in depth. Discussion groups with representatives from community and voluntary organisations and service providers were followed up by in-depth interviews with a wide cross-section of 30 residents in each area to explore issues of diversity and equality, and related policy and practice in the neighbourhoods. The residents came from white British, black Caribbean, Somali and multiple-heritage backgrounds (mixed parentage from the other three groups), with the aim of facilitating exploration of relationships within and between new and established communities.

For further information

The full report, **Social cohesion in diverse communities** by Maria Hudson, Joan Phillips, Kathryn Ray and Helen Barnes, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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