

Identifying solutions to increase participation in physical activity interventions within a socio-economically disadvantaged community: a qualitative study

Why are we interested in physical activity within socio-economically disadvantaged communities?

Increasing physical activity can improve health, reduce the risk of chronic disease, such as cancer, heart disease, and death, and increase life expectancy. Recent research has shown that physical activity is lower in those who live in socio-economically disadvantaged communities, for example, areas of low income, education and living standards. We know little about how to increase the physical activity levels of people living in such communities. Information regarding the design, implementation and promotion of physical activity initiatives within socio-economically disadvantaged communities is required to engage individuals and ultimately help them to increase their level of physical activity which will in turn lead to wider health benefits.

What did we want to find out?

We aimed to explore = local residents' and leaders' perceptions of past physical activity initiatives and suggestions for future schemes, in order to improve our understanding of the needs, expectations, and factors relevant to the design and delivery of future physical activity initiatives in socially disadvantaged communities.



The current study was carried out in the Connswater area of East Belfast and within the ongoing 'Physical Activity and the Rejuvenation of Connswater' (PARC) Study. The PARC study is a before-and-after evaluation of the effects of an ongoing urban regeneration project, the Connswater Community Greenway (CCG). We interviewed 113 local residents living in Ballymacarett, The Mount, Woodstock and Island; and 12 community leaders from statutory or voluntary organisations, who had experience of working in the area and had a remit for planning or delivering physical activity initiatives in the area. These organisations included local charities, business organisations, community and social partnerships, and in the local Council, Healthcare Trust, Education Board, Police Service and the Public Health Agency.

Participants were asked questions relating to (1) their perceptions and knowledge of current and past community physical activity initiatives in the local area; (2) what they thought were successful and unsuccessful aspects of physical activity initiatives; and (3) what they thought had worked, and would work to promote physical activity in their community.



What did we find?

1) *Awareness of physical activity initiatives*

Interviewees highlighted a poor awareness of previous and current physical activity schemes, other than those in which they had personally been involved, suggesting a lack of interest for physical activity. Comments reflected little linkage or shared communication between or within statutory or voluntary sectors or inclusion of local residents in the planning or delivery of physical activity initiatives. Leaders of voluntary organisations reported feeling “out of the loop” with statutory agencies, and reported an absence of collaborative working between community groups.

2) *Factors contributing to success of physical activity initiatives*

Interviewees perceived that there was value in involving community members from the start to ensure community “ownership” and to guarantee that plans would be relevant and tailored to the local community. Interviewees considered that it was important to target the ‘right people’ and to offer options regarding details of the scheme’s delivery, to ensure that it would address people’s needs.

Funding, community engagement and volunteer support were also thought to be vital for the success of any initiative. Interviewees also recognised a need for strategic planning, and better linkage between organisations and with the community and perceived that it was important to have an identified “exit strategy”, whereby physical activity schemes were not isolated short-term events but were planned to support physical activity, with resources that would be available in the longer term.

3) *Barriers to participation in physical activity initiatives*

Apathy was identified as a barrier to physical activity promotion both individually and within the community as a whole. Apathy was also linked to poor self-esteem and leaders suggested that there was a need for specific programmes to support the development of personal skills e.g. socialising with others, confidence building, and increasing self-esteem. Interviewees also reported that access to resources and having established facilities within the locality would promote engagement in physical activity in the longer term. They also felt that the community lacked knowledge of the benefits of physical activity for health and recognised a communication gap in current approaches to promote physical activity. Promotion strategies highlighted the importance of face-to-face contacts and social-networking in communication, involving ‘word of mouth’. Residents also highlighted the value of being kept informed about the ongoing progress of initiatives and that this encouraged community engagement.



Table 1 Key themes and supporting quotes

1. Awareness of physical activity initiatives	<p><i>"I probably couldn't put a number, put a number on how many are currently running at the moment but they seem to run on quite an adhoc basis throughout the year" (IN 1)</i></p> <p><i>"I don't actually (know of any schemes) em and that's not to suggest that there isn't any but I don't know of any" (Schemes) (IN 4)</i></p> <p><i>"There are schemes happening, but they're not in east Belfast that I'm aware of and that's the sad thing" (IN 5)</i></p> <p><i>"You've had this gap between eh, eh the statutory and the non-statutory sector, they would say, this is what we do and this is what we are going to deliver and a lot of time there is not a huge amount of consultation with or community involvement in terms of what they are delivering" (IN 2)</i></p>
2. Factors contributing to success of physical activity initiatives	<p><i>"Whenever you've had the community in at first" (IN 8)</i></p> <p><i>"It's getting the right people involved and eh targeting the right people" (IN 2)</i></p> <p><i>"Going to the actual community and saying okay, giving them options" (IN 8)</i></p> <p><i>"Ownership is going to be crucial, it is only through that, that people will actually develop a sense of value" (IN 9)</i></p> <p><i>"Long term funding" (IN 3)</i></p>
3. Barriers to participation in physical activity initiatives	<p><i>"Apathy in the community and the community organisation" (IN 1)</i></p> <p><i>"Bombarded with potential programs....overworked or jaded or maybe a wee bit burnt out" (IN 1)</i></p> <p><i>"I think there is a lot of low self-esteem, personal development is much needed" (IN 4)</i></p> <p><i>"There's a big issue around access to services and eh access, you know particularly around physical activity" (IN 2)</i></p>

Conclusions

Evidence from this study highlights and provides information that would be considered important for those designing and planning to deliver interventions utilising the CCG. This study highlights the existence of poor communication, with ineffective sharing of information regarding physical activity schemes within socio-economically disadvantaged communities. It also shows a need for better recognition, by service providers, of the problems people experience which prevent them from leading an active life. Therefore, our findings suggest further work should be performed to establish better links and communication strategies to increase the promotion and uptake of physical activity schemes at a community level which would be beneficial for schemes in the Connswater area.

When planning physical activity schemes, consideration should be given to the multiple factors which influence physical activity behaviour in socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Our findings provide examples of the value of involving residents to engage target communities from the outset and how public engagement can identify local problems to inform the design and development of interventions which target

disadvantaged groups. Giving communities a sense of ownership should empower individuals and increase their capabilities. Therefore, those designing and delivering physical activity initiatives that are planning to utilise the CCG should involve residents from the outset. Physical activity information delivered to socio-economically disadvantaged groups should be 'clear and consistent', enhancing confidence and beliefs. Sharing community leaders' and lay residents' knowledge with those who plan physical activity interventions should optimise opportunities, ensure safety and provide appropriate facilities for all. Increasing residents' awareness of the relevance of physical activity for health may promote collaboration between community groups, and success in their applications for funding.

Acknowledgements

This work was carried out as part of a PhD funded by the Department of Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland. We also acknowledge funding from the UKCRC Centre of Excellence for Public Health (Northern Ireland). The PARC study is supported by a grant from the National Prevention Research Initiative (<http://www.mrc.ac.uk/Ourresearch/ResearchInitiatives/NPRI/index.htm>). The Funding Partners are (in alphabetical order): Alzheimer's Research Trust; Alzheimer's Society; Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council; British Heart Foundation; Cancer Research UK; Chief Scientist Office, Scottish Government Health Directorate; Department of Health; Diabetes UK; Economic and Social Research Council; Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council; Health and Social Care Research and Development Division of the Public Health Agency (HSC R&D Division); Medical Research Council; The Stroke Association; Welsh Assembly Government and World Cancer Research Fund.

Citation:

Cleland, Claire L, Hunter, Ruth F, Tully, Mark A, Scott, David, Kee, Frank, Donnelly, Michael, Prior, Lindsay, and Cupples, Margaret E (2014) *Identifying solutions to increase participation in physical activity interventions within a socio-economically disadvantaged community: a qualitative study*. International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 11 (1). p. 68. 1479-5868

Corresponding author:

Prof Margaret Cupples
Department of General Practice
and Primary Care, Queen's
University Belfast, Dunluce
Avenue, Belfast BT9 7HR
E-mail: m.cupples@qub.ac.uk

For more information about the PARC Study contact:

E-mail: parc@qub.ac.uk
<http://go.qub.ac.uk/parcstudy>