Young people's perspectives on addressing health inequalities

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The Creative Insights project involved developing a participatory approach for exploring young people's perspectives on health inequalities. It brought together researchers with young people and creative organisations Impact Arts in Glasgow and Leeds Playhouse and Opera North in Leeds.

What were we interested in?

Addressing the unfair differences in health and wellbeing between different population groups in the UK is a key challenge for policymakers. Public perspectives on how to go about this challenge are not well-understood. Despite young people's increasingly visible role in activism and the potential impact of widening inequalities on their generation's health and wellbeing, their perspectives have been particularly neglected in research. Here we focus on the following questions:

1. What do young people envisage a fairer society in which health inequalities are reduced would look like?

2. What are young people's perceptions of key policy domains for addressing inequalities and what actions do they support in reducing inequalities?

What did we do?

Six groups of young people (39 in total) from Glasgow and Leeds took part in online workshops to discuss their views on health inequalities and potential solutions. Artist-facilitators and researchers supported participants to explore evidence, debate solutions and imagine a more desirable society, using visual and performance art.

What did we learn?

Young people shared their visions for alternative futures in which health inequalities are reduced and developed a series of policy proposals for reducing health inequalities, across four domains: governance, environment, society/culture, and economy. Proposals ranged from radical, whole-systems change to policies currently being considered by governments across the UK.

Governance – a participatory future?

Participants shared visions of future governance that involved replacing or enhancing current systems to address inequalities in power. Improved approaches were associated with cooperation, transparency, and devolution. In Leeds, participants discussed community-level governance:

> *…the community would run the community. So it would just be normal people […] And you can go to, like, the big town hall, or something, have a discussion, get to know each other's points, have a bit of an argument and debate […]. Because there's nothing saying that we can't do the job that they're [current UK government] doing, […] if we managed to get our ideas out there, into our own communities, we could be the change that we need. (Leeds, she/her, 16)*

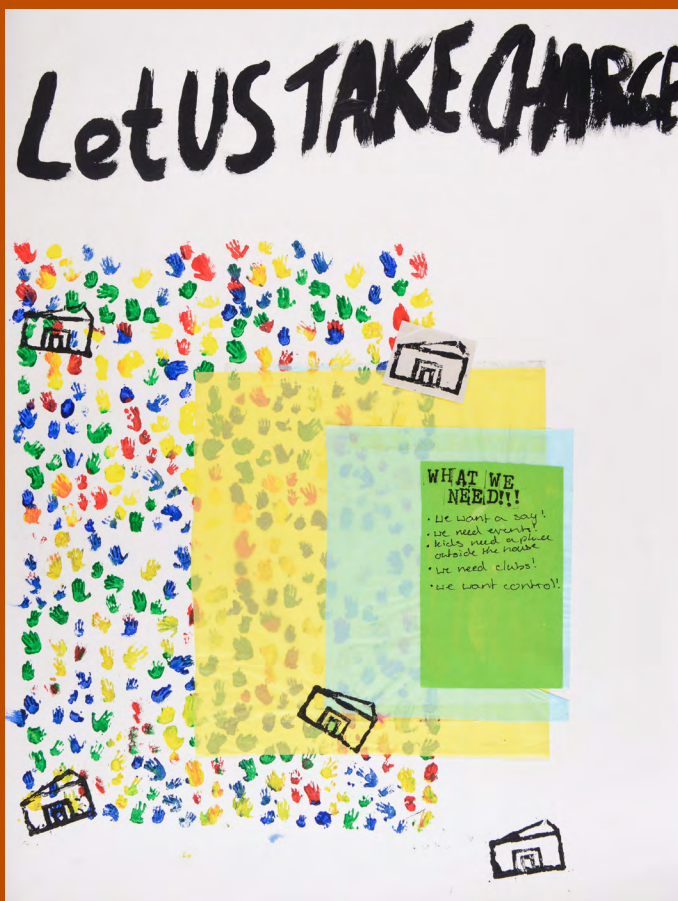Similarly in Glasgow, one participant produced this poster:

Figure 1:

Poster entitled 'Let US TAKE CHARGE' featuring: a repeated print of small hands in blue, yellow, red and green and layers of rectangular yellow and blue tissue paper; green rectangle contains the words 'What we need!!! We want a say! We need events; Kids need a place outside the house; We need clubs! We want control!'; printed image of a community building. (Glasgow, she/her, 15)

She explained how her poster was conceived: "I really wanted to have a pattern in it, so using little hands […] to symbolise that communities, that are being brought together, make decisions" (Glasgow, she/her, 15).

Young people's proposals suggest their support for calls to embrace democratic innovations and participatory decision-making to reduce those power imbalances which predicate health inequalities.

Environment – a shared and sustainable future?

Proposals regarding the environment suggest the wide-reaching positive impacts young people expected that improving places could have on health. Many prioritised the need for communities to have connection to nature. Addressing inequalities in access to green space was prioritised.

> *I think there is a lot of unused space that could be used to make it greener, like putting gardens on top of it, namely roofs, so I think there could be many benefits to this. I think it would be more space for people to hang about, it would be a fun thing to get into gardening and take care of it.*
> *(Glasgow, he/him, 18)*

Many participants envisioned a social or community element to the green spaces they described, whether places to "hang about" or grow food to share. These remarks suggest intuitive understandings of how sharing outdoor space might be expected to foster relationships with neighbours and increase a sense of community, which in turn could improve health and wellbeing.

Participants also discussed the built environment and housing. Concern to ensure a high quality of housing for all and to prevent or mitigate homelessness was discussed across several groups,

> *We want affordable housing for everyone.*
> *(Leeds, she/her, 16)*

reflecting well the importance of housing for health and potential of housing interventions to reduce inequalities. More radical suggestions were also proposed to address vast inequalities in property suggesting potential support for mechanisms to reduce wealth inequalities as a means of addressing health inequalities.

Society/culture – an inclusive future?

The values of a well-functioning society were central to young people's discussions of alternative futures with reduced inequality. Across all groups, open and supportive communities were imagined, that were free from discrimination and embraced empathy and respect. One participant commented:

> *I also put acceptance. I also felt free, that no one was judging me, because usually, when I'm in town, I'm, you know, all gothed up and everything, I get stares, slurs, all that good old stuff. I also felt less alert when I was there.*
>
> *Facilitator: Yes, because there's no need to be alert?*
>
> *No need to be alert.*
> *(Leeds, he/him, 19)*

Echoing wider accounts of how fear and stigmatisation constrain health (by restricting people's access to spaces and activities), young people were conscious of the need to address discrimination and promote inclusivity within societies to address inequalities. Addressing similar concerns, one participant in Glasgow produced this artwork:

Figure 2:
Poster featuring: line drawing cross-section of a street; stick figures walking and playing a game outside, and cooking, eating and standing at a bar with an 'open' sign inside; repeat hand print in rainbow colours with the words 'WE ARE ALL PEOPLE'; colourful paint splatter. (Glasgow, he/him, 18).

He reflected on how unity featured in his artwork:

> […] when I think of like what I would like the planet to be, I think of more of like all people together, it's like all people against the problems instead of separating each other […]. So like there's still like sadness in family and people getting caught in the rain, but it's everyone kind of together against the problems.
> (Glasgow, he/him, 18)

Young people's accounts also then lend support to calls for increasing social cohesion and eliminating discrimination to address inequalities.

Economy – a generous and balanced future?

Young people's visions of economic futures were broadly concerned with addressing injustices and protecting people's mental health. In general, the visions young people shared of employment focused on wellbeing:

> People work half the week and rest the other half.
> (Glasgow, she/her, 14)
>
> There would also be paid hobbies with hourly rates. Choose how much you work. […] Encourage work to benefit the community, i.e. picking up rubbish.
> (Leeds, she/her, 16, paraphrased to whiteboard)

For many of the young people, work was reconceptualised as protecting the health of individuals and communities in terms of what it entailed (enjoyable activity), what it contributed to (communities, not profits), and how much was required (enough, not more). These suggestions echo calls for substantial policy shifts where wellbeing (rather than economic productivity) is placed at the heart of policymaking.

Discussions across all groups included proposals to address levels of pay, with an emphasis on fairness. Some interpreted fairness as equal pay for equal work, including addressing the disparity in UK minimum wage by age (from April 2023 UK National Minimum/Living Wage ranged from £5.28 (under 18) to £10.42 (23 and over)). Most suggested key workers (especially healthcare and retail staff) should be paid more, while some advocated for equal pay for everyone in a commitment to absolute equality.

Participants also discussed overhauling the UK welfare system to better address poverty, a goal that was universally supported. Interest was expressed by most groups in UBI, an unconditional income for all, which some experts argue has potential to address health inequalities globally.

Despite emphasis on the importance of community-level governance, participants valued national-level policy action on employment, pay and welfare in ways that prioritise wellbeing.

Conclusions

- Calls for wider public conversations around the social determinants of health are likely to be met with both willing participants and wide-ranging reflections on the range of actions needed to address health inequalities in the UK.

- Young people's proposals to address the enduring existence of health inequalities in the UK signal support for 'upstream' systemic change to achieve reductions in social inequalities and the health differences that flow from these.

- In many cases, young people's proposals are well-aligned with those expressed by population health researchers and advocates.

- Citizens and communities, including young people, have a valuable role to play in research and advocacy efforts to influence policy decision-making around the kinds of 'upstream' policies that both young people and population health researchers' support.

Further information

Find out more on the Creative Insights website.

Read the full paper: Fergie, G., Vaczy, C., Smith, K., Mackenzie, M., Phan, T.T. and Hilton, S. (2023), Young people's perspectives on addressing UK health inequalities: utopian visions and preferences for action. Health Expectations. https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13825.

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