



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST

COMMUNITIES
AND PLACE

Summary document in advance of year one report:

Growing up in the Market three-year longitudinal study

Introduction to the study

Queen's Communities and Place (QCAP) aims to better understand the enduring nature of place-based social disadvantage to help bring sustainable change to local economic, social and environmental challenges. Core to the QCAP initiative is our three-year qualitative longitudinal '**Growing up in the Market**' (GUIM) study.

GUIM originated from extensive engagement with young people, their families and a range of key stakeholders which highlighted the long term, interconnected issues and the multiple forms of challenge within communities. Like so many communities already struggling, these challenges were exacerbated by COVID. From this engagement, four broad areas helped shaped our collective enquiry for this first year. We sought to document the **lived experiences of**:

- ❖ **Education pathways /Careers**
- ❖ **Everyday Community and family life**
- ❖ **Health and wellbeing**
- ❖ **Equality and opportunity**

Background

As Northern Ireland entered the Covid pandemic in 2020, nearly one-in-five people lived in poverty, including over 100,000 children (JRF, 2022). Overall, low-income families who were already struggling financially before COVID-19 have been more vulnerable to the additional stresses of the pandemic. The current cost-of-living crisis means many people now have to prioritise between energy and food spending. With average incomes in Northern Ireland amongst the lowest in the UK, the situation for those families already struggling could be described as a perfect storm. It was against this background that we set out to better understand the persistent challenges around health, education and employment opportunities of children and young people and their family.

It is well documented that socioeconomic inequalities profoundly affect children's educational attainment (Smith & Gallagher, 2000; Dalmajier et al, 2021; Early et al, 2022). We can also track a direct pathway from deprivation to reduced employment opportunities (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). Despite these significant disadvantages there are a range of outcomes possible and regularly achieved by people from our most deprived areas prompting us to question how and what makes the difference for these individuals.

Method and Procedure

GUIM has a significant focus on children and young people's career through education at key transition points. This is captured through interviews with children and young people at specific ages. Experiences of bringing up a child in the Market are captured through a broader focus on the four key aspects highlighted above with a parent and/or guardian of most young people who took part; some young people participated independently.

A qualitative longitudinal (QL) methodology is used to illuminate complex causal processes with capacity to support and facilitate the production of dynamic real-world evidence for policy and professional practice (Neale, 2021). This cohort study will provide detailed information on the lived experience of young people and their families in challenging circumstances, highlighting enablers and barriers in these trajectories and help identify effective solutions for positive change. QL approach allows us to look beyond what works, to *how* things work as it allows us to interpret complex causality.

We have completed year one of the project with 60 individual interviews with children and young people and parents in the Market community.



Children in their final primary school year (age 11). Focusing on their experience of the transfer system in NI and their feelings about growing up in and learning in the Market.

N-11



Secondary school children in year 10 (age 13/14) and year 12 (age 15/16). Focusing on GCSE choices and future opportunities.

N-17



Young adults (age 17-24) in further education or employment. Focusing on occupational opportunities.

N-10



Parents of children and young people. Focusing on experiences of bringing up children in the Market.

N-22



The 22 parental interviews represent 22 'Family Units' – where the child and young person and their parent/guardian both participated

EMERGING THEMES



Community cohesion

I was born and reared in the Market and so were my children, so was my mummy and so it goes on.

Both adults and children described a ‘close knit’ community, knowing lots of neighbours and living in proximity to friends and family. While not universal, the connectedness of neighbourhood life was viewed as an ‘asset’, helping reduce feelings of isolation for many and engendering a sense of positive emotions such as pride for most adults and young people alike.

However, adult reflections of times past raised some ambivalence, with parents describing a weakening of community connection and a growing concern in relation to their children’s safety. Despite this, most participants had no desire to live anywhere else. A significant issue, particularly for young adults, was the shortage of housing in the area and increasing anxiety about securing their own accommodation in the future.

Initial findings suggest the value of investigating the potential benefits of policy initiatives that build on existing assets and promote the social fabric of the community.



Substance Use

Impacting on the positive beliefs about having a connected community is the increasing drug landscape. Parents discussed the increasing prevalence of substance use, and the impact that this had on the perceived safety of the area.

Respondents shared that they had noticed an increase in people struggling due to substance use, particularly younger people who had become addicted and also shared that this seemed to have increased since COVID.

For example, one mother shared;

There's a lot of addiction issues around here at the minute and, obviously, there's always been addiction, but it's very public now. I think during COVID a lot of stuff came out and a lot more addiction came out.

While substance use is not specific to the Market community, frequent references were made by parents to the need for greater coordinated efforts to understand and confront the issue.



Mental Health

The growing prevalence of mental ill health within the local and wider community was a strong theme with most parents and older adolescents suggesting the issue was likely to be greater than official statistics suggest.

Linkages were proposed between addiction, poor mental health and suicide. Many participants shared their own experience of mental ill health and a concern for the mental wellbeing of others including young people. Some participants expressed frustration with perceived lack of access to appropriate help, as one participant shared;

Do you know I had a friend who actually killed himself there not that long ago. And he rang the doctor's. So, to me, that wee fella, he didn't want to die, people don't understand people killing themselves, but they don't really want to die, they're crying out for help because they don't want to feel this way. And he was trying to get help.

Mental health conditions, addiction and suicide are interconnected issues, not separate problems, but this is not well understood generally. Greater awareness across various services and improved access were among participants’ thoughts on strategies to tackle the issue.



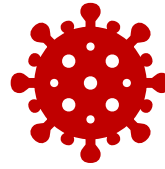
Cost of Living

Families described major concerns about the rising cost of living and expressed fear about their capacity to deal with any more strains on their household finances. Parents shared that whatever their current financial situation it was likely to get worse. For example one parent shared;

Financially you can hardly live with the price of things, it was hard and it's getting harder. We are only into the start of it so come back next year and ask us how we are getting on and we will probably be on our knees.

The reality for many of the participants was that rising costs do not equate to having to 'tighten their belt' or sacrifice a few luxuries, keeping up with bills is now becoming a 'constant struggle'.

Financial precarity is well recognised for inducing stress, anxiety and exacerbating other mental health conditions. This situation was reflected in many participant interviews. Navigating the reforms to recent benefit regulations was an additional concern for a few parents, highlighting the necessity of access to accurate and accessible information.



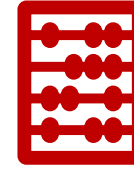
Legacy of COVID

There was evidence of the ongoing legacy of covid on the educational disruptions of the young people in GUIIM. Some participants had suffered disruption of key transition and exam years. Some had missed out on the transfer test as it was cancelled, some had arrived back from lock down and had to sit GCSE examinations as in this example;

I think it was a lot more harder because like the years that we needed the most like we didn't have them. And then we just had to go back and literally just try to do it. You just didn't know anything. Like I had to start again from square one

An important issue raised by parents and confirmed by children and young people was the increased online delivery of education post covid, including communications between parents and teachers. This underlined the need for parents to be digitally confident and have the ability to maintain digital connectivity at home for themselves and for their children.

There was widespread agreement among family respondents and young people on the absolute necessity for children to have access not just to a device, but to have a device for each school-aged child.



ACEs and Education

It is well known that experiencing multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is a risk factor for a range of poor outcomes in adulthood and is linked with educational attainment (Houtepen et al, 2020).

Our initial observations with participants, reflected exposure to ACEs across the sample and given the context of the community and the legacy of conflict raised questions of transgenerational aspects to the transmission of trauma and adversity (Schoon and Melis, 2019). Parents, in particular, described traumatic and persistent stressors during childhood alongside less favourable educational experiences and outcomes. Similarly, young people reported adverse experiences in their familial and communal lives (including the Covid-19 pandemic), which coincides with examples of educational challenge.

It is of interest to understand how certain individuals with normative outcomes, develop resilience to ACEs common to the community. As our analysis continues, we hope to better understand the place-based nature of ACEs in relation to education and its transgenerational character.



Educational Achievement

Existing research shows a clear relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and educational outcomes (Smith & Gallagher, 2000; Early et al, 2022). The GUIM data reflect this but also provide us with an opportunity to explore the deeper resonances of this association—for example, the role and experiences of parents (by which we usually mean Mothers).

Our sample reflects a wide range of outcomes for people in the community, implying that socio-economic disadvantage is by no means a deterministic factor. There is also an additional spatial dimension to this in which less favourable education outcomes tend to be concentrated in particular places (Kerr & Dyson, 2017; McAvinue, 2022). This place-based element is an emerging theme suggesting a need to reimagine the impact and significance of concentrated disadvantage.

One important emerging observation relates to the sources of information our respondents use in their choice preferences—pathways taken by peers may be at least as influential, if not more so, than ‘official’ sources of information in affecting preferences. This in turn may further reflect the significance of place, community, and context as factors in educational preferences and outcomes.



Parental Engagement

Research suggests that parental factors including engagement with their child’s education and their level of qualification—particularly Mothers’—are key factors in the educational outcomes of children and young people (Early et al, 2022).

The majority of the parents/guardians involved in GUIM are Mothers, who also report not having qualifications beyond GCSE or NVQ. Whilst some expressed an interest in further study, there was a lack of confidence for returning to education. Our observations suggest that whilst parents and/or guardians are motivated to support their child’s education there are often challenges in providing appropriate and effective support. One such example was difficulties experienced during covid lockdowns with ‘learning from home’, navigating online school systems and understanding certain topics being covered.

Most of the young people we interviewed said that they do not seek help from home with their learning but reported that parents and/or guardians would make themselves available to help if they were needed.



Post-16 Provision

Reports focusing on post-16 provision in Northern Ireland have recently highlighted that secondary school pupils’ perceive skills and training options as less valuable and less advantageous in comparison to higher education and university (Purdy et al, 2022). Similarly, post-16 pathways for learners through skills and training into growth sector labour markets have been highlighted as an area in need of improvement to effectively support economic growth (Bergin & McGuinness, 2022).

Those we interviewed, at key points of transition in education, had significant gaps in their information about the prerequisites for their chosen post-16 careers. We have also observed varied aspirations in relation to higher education, with participants highlighting a range of priorities and perceived challenges. In nearly all cases of school leaving, our young participants suggested that they were keen to seek an income as soon as possible. It could be that these observations reflect the broader issue of an apparent lack of alternative pathways through education into work once young people leave statutory education, alongside the socio-economic context of the community.

Impact of emerging evidence

The 60 in-depth interviews carried out in this study resulted in a significant volume of rich data. The emerging themes presented above not only represented some initial impressions but also some areas of immediate need requiring rapid action. As detailed above there was evidence of significant concern within the community regarding increased substance use, resulting in an increase in drug related deaths. While substance use problems are not new there has been an increase in prevalence and a shift in the type of substance in use, towards opiates, prescription painkillers and polydrug use - all of which increase the risk of overdose. Another issue very present in the mind of the participants was the rising cost of living.

In response to these emerging findings we produced two evidence briefs, one detailing the community concerns about substance use and one regarding the cost-of-living crisis. These documents provided the evidence towards which we directed several interventions.



Immediate Actions



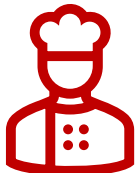
A service mapping exercise for addiction and substance use providers whose services covered the Market area was carried out. This information was used to populate a digital pathway housed in the community dashboard. This resource was designed to improve signposting and increase the capacity of the community organisation when they were offering support to residents and responding to enquiries. We have ongoing plans for further digital pathways, most urgently one with information on wider mental health services and services for early years and parenting.



We organised the rapid delivery of naloxone training and distribution within the community. Naloxone is an opioid antagonist which reverses the effect of overdose. This lifesaving treatment is increasingly in use in communities as the opioid crisis worsens globally. We organised peer to peer training for community workers, leaders and selected residents who would also be able to hold doses of the medication. We also made available 100 doses and seeing the urgency arranged this to be delivered before the Christmas period, a time of known vulnerability.



We supported the community organisation, the Market Development Association, with the delivery of a Christmas hamper for 170 residents to include a weeks worth of breakfasts, lunch and dinners and gas and electric vouchers.



We are developing a PAR project to begin January 2023. This life skills initiative which will focus on 'Cooking on a budget', is designed to provide an interactive and fun course which will provide support around food insecurity related to cost of living and encourage healthy eating.



In the education sphere we also noted that parents involved were under qualified with 15 out of 22 having no higher qualifications than GCSE's or NVQ's. Previous evidence from the community suggested that 24% of people had no qualifications. This indicated a need within the adult population for an educational solution that addressed the needs of this group which would also tackle the lack of confidence evident regarding returning to education. To address this we are working with Belfast Met HE College to develop a connector course which will be designed to increase confidence in reentering education or training.



The initial themes and findings will help shape two new mental health research posts, including an Irwin fellowship starting in January 2023.

Next steps

Concluding year one

- We continue to conduct the thematic analysis of the collected data in order to produce a detailed year one report and to inform our actions, methods and materials in year two.
- Analysis of the interviews will include establishing follow up questions for individual participants and by cohort – e.g. asking participants to reflect on educational choices made last year

Beginning year two

- Identifying a new challenge area and developing interview questions for this topic – in consultation with the community the challenge area has been identified as ‘Mental Health and substance use’
- Refining the existing interview schedule based on the analysis and our experience of conducting interviews in year one

Final Thoughts

One of the great strengths of the qualitative longitudinal approach is the rich opportunities that emerge when looking at changes over time; data sets become more robust and relationships strengthen. However there is also an opportunity to respond flexibly and immediately to urgent issues relevant to community need. Our first steps in collecting and beginning to examine this data involved immediate action in a number of areas. Reporting of emerging themes should acknowledge that as the project progresses, further data gathering, participant attrition and more in depth analysis raises the potential for contradiction in later reporting. This might indeed prove to provide an interesting comparison as the project progresses. Most significantly our strong partnership with the community ensures a authentic commitment to approach our activity with humanity and therefore respond rapidly to evidenced need.

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