Ties that bind: Young people, community and social capital in the wake of the pandemic

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The connection that young people have to their local neighbourhood and community has been shown to impact on health and wellbeing, particularly for those living in the most deprived areas. We report on a qualitative participatory study using photo elicitation methods undertaken in three deprived neighbourhoods across London exploring concepts of community and social connection, with young people aged 13–24 years, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. The construct of social capital, referring to the extent of solidarity and connection between groups, has been shown to impact on pandemic related outcomes, and is used in this study as a lens to enhance understanding of young people's experience of the pandemic.

Young people created heterogenous physical social ties across class, ethnicity, and geographical area which were important during the pandemic, although these may be jeopardised by a range of factors including fear of violence, mistrust of those in power, parental control and place-based inequity. The isolation and localism enforced by the pandemic encouraged young people to pay more attention to the value of local connections they built up both with people and place.

Place-based research needs to continue a dialogue with young people, acknowledging and drawing on existing networks, community assets and cultural beliefs. The impact of COVID-19 on accentuating existing inequalities means that the need for place-based action, addressing the social determinants of health and involving the experiences and input of the young, is more vital than ever.

1. Background

The local area in which young people grow-up and develop is associated with their health and wellbeing, a connection which often endures throughout the life-course, impacting on long-term economic, social, psychological and health outcomes (Marmot, Allen, Boyce, et al., 2020). Neighbourhood-level social determinants of health – i.e. the conditions under which people are born, grow up, live, work and age - are associated with both physical and mental health outcomes (Wellever, 2017).

This study explores the interaction of person with place, paying particular attention to perceptions of community - and uses social capital as a conceptual tool to help understand how young people from diverse backgrounds, living in inner-city London, respond to and interact with their local neighbourhoods and how this may have changed due to the pandemic. Relationships are important not just for general social development but also because they connect people to educational, economic and social resources. The ability to connect socially and maintain relationships is a central component of creating strong social capital (Putnam, 2000). This process of forging ties has been severely impacted during the pandemic, both as a result of the increased isolation imposed by lockdown and the enforcement of physical distancing in public places (Saville & Thomas, 2022). The staggering rise in young people's mental health referrals in the UK (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021), following the pandemic is likely to be linked, in part, to restriction and constraints to the forging of healthy social connection (Cacioppo et al., 2008; Maslow, 1943).

The concept of social Capital is of particular interest given that empirical studies have demonstrated a direct relationship between it and health outcomes; with both protective and negative impacts being observed (Bartscher et al.; Borgonovi et al., 2021; Elgar et al., 2020). Although there are ongoing debates about definitions and measurement of social capital it is nonetheless recognised as an important public health resource. (Saville & Thomas, 2022). Social capital tends to be measured through aggregated quantitative devices, using data from large quantitative surveys such as The World Values Survey (World Values Survey Association, 2022), combining measures of trust, group affiliations, civic engagement and confidence in state institutions (Agampodi et al., 2015; Elgar et al., 2020). Yet, because social capital is multidimensional and complex, traditional measures are unlikely to capture all aspects of the construct, particularly with a young audience for whom many of the standard questions used with adults may be inappropriate. The importance, therefore, of building greater qualitative insights into young people's perceptions of, and relationship to, community is evident (Scales, Boat, & Pekel, 2020).

The term, social capital, popularised at the end of the twentieth century refers loosely to the extent of connectedness and solidarity between groups in a particular local area or society, providing an indication of the extent of resources individuals invest in social networks (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Wilkinson, 2002). The various factors which constitute social capital reside in characteristics of social structures (such as levels of interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity, links with civic society) which act to support individuals and can prompt and facilitate collective action. In this sense, it pertains to a form of social cohesion (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000) which is lodged not in the individual, but in the structure of social relationships and demonstrates the importance of relational assets (Field, 2005). Distinction is drawn between structural and cognitive forms of social capital; structural referring to actual participation in networks and cognitive relating to perceptions of (or capability of) those social networks to result in resource exchange (trust and reciprocity) (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). A recent review of literature focussing specifically on young people found that the two strongest elements of social capital, pertinent to young people are relationships and resources (Scales et al., 2020).

Commentators, however, have also noted the destructive effects of aspects of social capital – particularly the propensity that high levels of bonding social capital can have a range of detrimental impacts. Social networks for example, which are tightly bonded and exclusive, have been shown to increase insularity, reducing movement between groups. A study of socially excluded young adults in the North of England concluded that the local networks to which they feel they belong, may work to reproduce disadvantage and support criminality (MacDonald et al., 2005). Networks forged on the streets, create a form of bonding social capital, assisting members of these networks to 'get by', yet, at the same time may limit opportunities for economic advancement. Similarly socially advantaged groups can use bonding social capital to allocate resources which will improve their own chances of success whilst excluding those outside the bonded group, again reinforcing inequality (Murray et al., 2020).

COVID-19 has increased levels of isolation in young people and impacted on their ability to draw on the support of social networks (Ford et al., 2021). The particularly detrimental impact that enforced lockdowns and school closures have had on young people's mental health (Loades et al., 2020) highlights the importance of understanding how they have experienced and negotiated their local neighbourhood during the pandemic. Whilst support systems may decrease in times of crisis (Gauthier et al., 2021) there is sparse literature detailing how the ability of young people to access physical social networks, has affected their sense of wellbeing during the pandemic, particularly in marginalised communities. In this paper we set out to focus on the voice and experiences of young people, exploring concepts of community in deprived urban areas.

2. Aims

The aims of this paper are: to investigate how young people living in deprived urban neighbourhoods experience community in the wake of the pandemic and uses social capital as a conceptual tool to help understand connections to community and perceptions of 'connectedness' both at a personal level and more broadly to civic society. We explore how a range of socially determined factors may impact on how young people relate to and interact with their neighbourhood and consider factors which may facilitate or create barriers to engagement. By exploring the importance young people attach to social connection and community in periods of stress, we aim to develop an understanding of the strengths and assets of the networks in which they reside. Such an understanding could inform the design and delivery of interventions to improve the health and wellbeing of young people living in deprived urban areas.

3. Method

Conducted over the Spring and Summer of 2021, this qualitative participatory research took place in three boroughs of inner London (Southwark, Camden and Tower Hamlets (TH)). Given the significant contextual challenges to conducting fieldwork at this time, with constant changes to COVID-19 related policies (Dunn et al., 2020), an emergent methodology was used with researchers adopting a reflexive approach to the scope and ambitions of the project. The theoretical framework of social capital was adopted early on in the fieldwork, as the importance attached by young people to social relationships and networks began to emerge.

3.1. Study sites

The London boroughs selected were identified as having either high levels of absolute deprivation or particularly high inequalities i.e., a significant range between those in the top and bottom socio-economic profiles. Tower Hamlets is ranked 27th out of 317 boroughs nationally in terms of average scores for deprivation, Southwark is ranked 43rd and Camden 138th (GOV.UK., 2019). All these boroughs demonstrate high levels of inequality, particularly Camden where 16% of their population fall into the most deprived decile nationally and 6% into the most affluent (GOV.UK., 2019).

3.2. Recruitment and sampling

Young people (aged 13–24 years) were recruited through youth clubs, community groups and a school – all facilitated by community gatekeepers who were key to securing both access and trust. Given the restrictions imposed by the pandemic recruitment was guided by a pragmatic approach. Project information sheets and consent forms were distributed both to young people and, for those under the age of 16 years, to their parents. Volunteers were then selected by youth club leaders and teachers. Whilst, particularly in schools, this may have biased the sample towards high achievers and more advantaged students, in youth clubs the sample selected were those attending schemes full time during the holidays, generally from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds. Venues for the workshops were provided by the community organisations in settings which were familiar to the young people. Participants were given a £30 shopping voucher as recompense for their time. Ethical approval was received from LSHTM Ethics Committee (reference 18007). Participants, once recruited, were briefed about the study and its aims. Informed consent was gained from participants who were told they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Mindful of the complexities of recording ethnic and gender identity (Pasterny, 2022; Song, 2020) and not wanting to impose categories on people that they were not happy with, we have simply provided an indication of the diversity (albeit a reductive one). Ethnicity data,

gleaned from how participants described themselves during workshops, was recorded as; 8 White British, 37 Black, Asian, Mixed or 'other' (see Table 1).

3.3. Phases of research

The research process comprised of four distinct phases:

i) **A go-along interview** in the local neighbourhood (lasting 1–1.5 h). The 'go-along' is an in-depth qualitative interview conducted by a researcher accompanying participants on outings in their local environments (Carpiano, 2009). The process incorporates a combination of observation and interview, and provides direct experience of the environment of participants (Kusenbach, 2003). As such they offer a participatory, interactive research method. Engagement between the researcher and participant is influenced by spatial context and used to generate knowledge over which the participants have a greater level of control to manage and curate, than may be the case in traditional interview methods. Prior to the go-along a short session was held to establish ground rules, discuss confidentiality and conduct icebreaker exercises.

Following this, as we walked, researchers chatted with young people, probing their immediate responses to the area and using these responses to lead into informal conversations about their lives. The route of each go-along was flexible, agreed by both young people and researchers and based on participant preference, knowledge of area and pragmatics.

ii) During the walk-about young people were asked to take photos of aspects of the environment which triggered a particular emotion, thought or feeling – both negative and positive. A photo-elicitation methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997) was used to capture and share experiences of their neighbourhood to explore broader aspects of participants' lives. Photo-elicitation methods have been used to explore how communities reflect upon and communicate about their lives. The method can have a role in empowering disenfranchised communities, assisting participants to 'become experts in their own lives' (Boucher, 2018, p. 16).

iii) A focus group discussion lasting about 2 h during which participants were prompted to explore aspects of their neighbourhood and community in more depth and highlight shared concerns and priorities. Participants each selected two photographs taken during the walkabouts which were used to promote discussion - exploring information, feelings and memories about how aspects of the physical and social environment may impact on their lived experiences, health and wellbeing. The focus groups supported elaboration of emergent themes from the photo elicitation.

iv) Following data analysis of stages i)-iii) a community exhibition was held in a local public venue, displaying key themes that emerged using selected photographs accompanied by direct quotations from participants. The purpose of this event was to promote dialogue and engagement between research participants, local authority decision makers and community stakeholders.

3.4. Analysis

Interviews were analysed using a thematic framework developed through the course of the research. Transcribed interviews were initially coded, using Nvivo software management tools, and then arranged into themes using a process of both inductive and deductive interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Miles et al., 2014). Analysis was conducted in stages: (i) reading the transcripts and highlighting quotes which were interesting, relevant and meaningful; (ii) reviewing highlighted quotes to look for patterns across participants, and (iii) categorising patterns into themes and related sub-themes whereby quotes referring to the same concept, belief or idea are categorised together. Photographs were chosen for the community exhibitions to represent the themes articulated in discussion – though they were not themselves used as part of the analysis. The analysis was conducted primarily by RB and SR and then shared and discussed iteratively with the wider team.

4. Findings

Social capital relates to the sense of connectedness and solidarity of social groups and is strongly influenced by individual context. For the young people we spoke to, insights into these connections (both structural and cognitive) emerged in relation to themes drawn out of the narrative. This section considers how community is envisaged and how the strength of community ties are impacted by aspects of the immediate neighbourhood and the impact of the pandemic.

4.1. Concepts of community – what are the ties that bind?

Young people demonstrated broad understandings of community encompassing geographic area, ethnicity, religious beliefs and local social networks such as sports teams or clubs. Whilst 'local' community for some constituted the inhabitants of the corridor in their block of flats, or a group characterised by shared ethnic descent, for others it was the football team or church.

Positive experiences of community were defined by a sense of 'feeling safe' and fitting-in. Pride in being part of an area was promoted by the security of feeling rooted in a familiar place where people supported each other. Physical aspects of the neighbourhood such as markets and youth clubs, played an important role in evoking memories which create a sense of permanence and belonging.

Table 1
Overview of workshops composition across five areas in three London boroughs.

Location	No of participants	Age Group (years)	Gender	Setting
Tower Hamlets: Isle of Dogs	5	16–24	F - 4 M −1	School
Tower Hamlets: Poplar	4	16–24	F-4	voluntary community group
Tower Hamlets: Poplar	8	16 and under	F – 4 M - 4	voluntary community group
Southwark: North Walworth	7	13–18	F - 5 M - 2	voluntary community group
Southwark: Burgess Park	5	13–18	F – 4 M- 1	voluntary community group
Camden: Gospel Oak	10	16 and under	F −7 M-3	voluntary community group
Camden: Gospel Oak	6	16–24	F- 6	voluntary community group

He's a key part of my childhood memories. He really reminds me of an after school summer day where I would wait for an ice cream... it's a sense of community, he's so familiar to me, and he can recognise me, and he's just one of those people that are genuinely nice, the kind of person who if you're a bit short on change, he'll let you off...(Camden YP)

*Community I would say is something that you fit in....
I think that is our nature, trying to fit in all the time
(Tower Hamlets UP)*

Ultimately a broad mix of factors appeared to play a part in the construction of community identity. The way community was experienced was strongly linked to individual context with young people articulating how factors located at different system levels (individual, family, school or neighbourhood) impacted on the way they interacted with the place around them. The ability not only to meet up easily and interact with friends, but to recognise a range of people and show kindnesses was key to feeling part of a vibrant community.

of more complex social connections emerged often linking across class and ethnic groups. Activities broadened from childhood meetings in the parks into pursuits geared towards personal interests and adventures.

At the time of fieldwork young people described how local social networks had been disrupted by pandemic restrictions – for some this had meant a re-focus on their immediate neighbourhood and appreciation of local support networks

… especially in the time of COVID I think like when you're isolating loads, the idea that you still have that community and that familiarity,

I think for me, to be from Queens Crescent means that I have a sense of community. And there are always people I know I can go to... (Camden YP).

A community is your church, your flats, your family, or your taekwondo class (Southwark YP).

Yeah, this woman just invited the whole family round to her house once and now she's still friends with my mum. Yeah, she's Jewish. And it was this Jewish festival (Camden YP).

Whilst some young people were insular in their preferences especially during the pandemic – staying in with family, reading, being online and playing video games – most also wanted to engage in social activities with friends away from home. For those from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities (BMECs) ethnicity was often cited as one of the strongest community ties with descriptions of strong networks within identified groups linked to family.

Basically, …everybody {people from the Bengali community}, will just randomly turn up at your house and just be like, hello … I just came over to say hi and stuff like that. You usually come over with like, either like a gift or something that is like a nice gesture towards somebody …. (TH YP).

For participants in this study, links between individual identity and concepts of community appeared to evolve and change over time as young people grow and develop. Freedoms granted to forge networks, outside the domestic sphere were mediated by their age, parental ethnic background and outlook. The extent to which parents controlled leisure activities and social groups appeared (for most) to lessen as children got older, gaining greater independence from family. Participants discussed how school and social groups began to exert more influence and a series

I feel like that does kind of help you a lot. (Camden YP)

Socialising seems much more important now (TH YP)

For some seeing friends after lockdown precipitated emotional exchanges which wouldn't have been considered necessary in more stable times.

With me and my friends … for the first time after not seeing them for so long, you realise, 'oh, I actually miss you guys'. And usually I would never say that. (Camden YP)

Others, even those who were previously reclusive and contained, were encouraged to reflect on the value of physical social connection

Before lockdown, right, I didn't go outside … so lockdown didn't affect me much … but then I realised, oh, I should probably go outside, because you know it can all be taken away (Camden YP)

Some participants described how their experience of and connection to community, was controlled by restrictions imposed by their parents who were, at times, reluctant to give them freedom to access the neighbourhood outside the domestic sphere. The reasons for this varied, for some young people it related to current family concerns about COVID-

19 risks, with parents wanting to keep their children close in the face of uncertainty and fear. For others it seemed to stem from a longer-term fear and suspicion of the heterogenous world outside the extended group of family and friends. Some young people who reported their parents to be particularly controlling, explained that whilst they were not allowed out with friends in an unstructured environment, formal youth clubs and supervised activities were seen to be a more secure environment and

exert influence and had agency to enact local change. Other respondents had taken on mentoring roles in the local youth club, working as coaches to support younger groups and develop life skills. One, spoke of the experience of being a youth representative with the local council, describing how, in a project supported by the local council, he influenced the neighbourhood graffiti art to reflect the diversity of the local population.

So, I had to sign up to be elected ... I'm deputy youth leader .... we have three priority issues: Black Lives Matter, knife crime and mental health.... I want to start at home...because my block is very... It's brown; it's very dull... ... so I just wanted to have something painted there, like have some young influential people painted on the wall....... so, it will inspire the children.... influential people from minority groups. So not just Black people but Hispanic, Asian... (Southwark YP).

could therefore offer a lifeline, protecting against isolation. One Muslim boy explained how his ability to attend the mosque had to fit around commitment to his football team and how his family were flexible in their expectations around this. However, these structured youth activities had been particularly impacted by the pandemic and absence of organised sport was strongly felt.

Although one woman of Chinese descent spoke of increased xenophobia since COVID-19 and the 'hate and violence' she had encountered, most participants reported growing levels of multicultural tolerance. Friendship groups in and outside school were ethnically mixed, shaped by a mixture of 'outlook', class, preference for leisure activities, ethnicity and gender.

> As we're being introduced more, we're understanding each other more. I think the community will grow stronger, because now we go to school with all sorts of different people. So, you go into school with Bengalis, white people, you've got people from the Afro Caribbean community … So when you go, they will be your family just as much as your ethnicity is. That's it (TH YP).

Some participants discussed why they felt social groups, defined largely by ethnic background, may be less important in second and third generation immigrants. One boy of Bangladeshi descent explained how, for his parents who were not born in Britain, staying close to your ethnic group was a survival strategy. Bangladeshis, when they first moved into Tower Hamlets encountered such high levels of racism and aggression that their immediate locality, where they sought the protection and allegiance of others of shared descent, became a 'safe-haven'.

> You know, back then racism was like, very common ..like people's windows were smashed … there was riots this and that. Yeah, like, we felt we felt safe here {in Tower Hamlets}. … I was born in the UK, right, but my parents weren't. So I feel like I'm, I'm a British Bangladeshi, you know. Yeah. So, I feel like this, this, this country is more home, you know, okay. Whereas my parents think of themselves as Bangladeshi (TH YP).

Some were motivated to participate in community activities, taking on formal roles in youth groups or the wider neighbourhood, and spoke positively about the subsequent feeling of empowerment. For these young people getting involved facilitated the realisation that they could

4.2. Barriers and facilitators to community connection and cohesion

Numerous examples were cited of instances which had been perceived to bring local communities together, including looking out for neighbours and friends during the COVID-19 pandemic, weekly clapping for the NHS, as well as collective responses to local planning decisions or violence and tragedies which had beset the community before COVID-19. Intrinsic to these unifying actions and events were a range of factors which young people recognised as having the potential either to create barriers or bring communities together; the impact of inequities, the way the pandemic played out and personal safety when moving about the neighbourhood, all received particular mention.

In all three boroughs young people discussed the considerable inequity present in their local neighbourhood and referred to their experiences of a 'them and us' society. Whilst inequity is not a new phenomenon it may be that the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and the necessity to stay local shone more of a spotlight on people's ability to access resources. Participants reflected that the experience of lockdown differed appreciably between socio-economic group. Those living in large houses with gardens had an easier time than residents in overcrowded flats with lack of access to outdoor space.

> Like it's just - we live in the same area, but people live completely different lives … some people are struggling .. some are more comfortable (TH YP).

> The neighbours have been doing things {for COVID-19} in the street, but not on my street - the street opposite me is much fancier ….my parents laugh at them, because they're, I don't know, they're quite … this woman just booted my mum off the group chat … they're just quite posh in the street opposite me …. They do their own lockdown things (Camden YP).

For some the glaring disparities caused anger and a sense of disassociation, creating barriers to cohesion across social groups. Whilst young people believed their views mattered there was little confidence that there was a forum for them to be heard by people that could effect change.

> {Our views} are relevant, but sometimes you don't have like opportunities for them to be listened to, I guess (Southwark YP).

Young people shared a suspicion of local urban regeneration describing an almost ubiquitous view that poorer people ('us') were being deliberately marginalised by local development led by local councils and developers ('them') resulting in an erosion in community spirit. The language of 'development' was viewed with cynicism – with young people referring to 'gentrification' as a device to move the poorer people out of the neighbourhood into the cheaper outskirts. Respondents had little expectation that development post- COVID-19 would result in better living standards for them or the local community.

Community centres came into their own providing meals for those in need, or giving out food and showing how to cook suggested recipes.

We would pick up the food in Burgess Park … they give it to us for free. And then after school at 6pm you would cook food and they'll give us the recipes and we go on Zoom calls and we'll do all the cooking together … (Southwark YP).

But for some, particularly for those in overcrowded housing, or with pre-existing mental health conditions, the pandemic exacerbated feelings

The problem is not making the houses like new..... problem is raising the prices and kicking people out of it... the council are doing it (Southwark YP).

You see it happening more and more, that feeling of them wanting to move people in, to kind of gentrify the area...to push the community out' (Camden YP).

This side is very, like, rich and, you know, posh and all that stuff. But you go further in, if you go further into the island, there's parts where you'd see like... I don't know how to explain it ...you can just tell they're council houses, if that makes sense (Tower Hamlets)

The inequalities exemplified by the contrast between modern luxury buildings, and the shabby disrepair of the existing highstreets and residential areas - especially social housing, was discussed by young people in all areas.

of uncertainty and increased social isolation. Young people recounted pressures of competing for space and access to resources at home (particularly laptops and Wi-Fi).

I shared a room with my two brothers over lockdown - they're quite

When we look at areas like Canary Wharf, we look at big skyscrapers...we think of rich white businessmen coming and working. But then you look at the ... flats in Canary Wharf... and you know, they're not they're not the richest, they're not the people who work in Canary Wharf, definitely not...the money is going to these big scrape skyscrapers (Tower Hamlets YP)
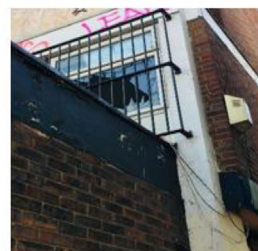
Often the focus was not on poverty or deprivation per se but the impact of inequalities.

If you like take Hampstead Heath, you can go to one side and see like massive houses that cost millions of pounds … and then .. further down you'll see … the complete opposite side of the spectrum.. there is still that sense of, oh, rich people in this box, and not so rich people in this box(Camden YP).

The impact of the pandemic on experience of social networks and community cohesion was mixed. Some talked positively about their parents knocking on neighbours' doors and creating WhatsApp groups to support the vulnerable.

When people came out every Thursday to clap for the NHS - that was really nice, I came on my balcony and everyone was there with pots and pans (TH YP).

noisy so it was a bit hard to concentrate (Southwark YP).

there's not a garden just a slab of concrete (Camden YP).

During the go-along interview many commented forlornly on the play areas and green spaces, previously full of life, now lying empty.

Kids who are seven or eight now – they don't leave the house (Southwark YP).

Some spoke about impacts on their family and parental anxieties that young people were missing out on essential physical socialisation.

My newly born brother didn't really go outside for the first year – he didn't socialise (Camden YP).

As lives became more insular during the pandemic the local neighbourhood assumed greater importance and the ability to access outdoor space such as Burgess Park, Hampstead Health or The Thames was particularly valued – as were the activities provided by local community

groups who remained open whilst schools and other services shut.

A spirit of resourcefulness was demonstrated with young people coping with the rising fear and uncertainty by adapting to the constraints, strengthening local social networks and taking a pragmatic approach to decisions around levels of risk and rule compliance.

> I tried to be as respectful as I can …. but there were points when I was like, I'm not going to not see my friends for two years, it's not going to happen … I like my mum but I can't spend too long with (her) (Camden YP.)

> I got to know my neighbours better … I would ask them how they were doing. …the community centre literally came into its own (Camden)

> You'd go outside… and knock on someone's door, ask if they want to play, and they would come out straightaway (Southwark)

> The thing is – I used to be motivated before this whole lockdown thing. Now…it's just…what's the point? I wouldn't call it depression. It's just long; it's just long. The whole thing is just long (Southwark).

A small number of participants mentioned how dissent relating to COVID-19 related policies was something that had created unity with some groups of young people.

> Loads of people are talking about the vaccine … they're like, 'oh, it's a bit too much'. They've never advertised a vaccine this much in my life. …. Yes, I think that's the only time people come together in a pandemic (Southwark YP).

Whilst it was apparent that the pandemic had had a significant impact on behaviour and access to networks there were a number of systemic and socio-economic observations which predated the pandemic. Stories of deprivation, violence and suffering, for example, were woven into the everyday narrative of many of the young people pre-dating COVID-19 and these factors influence the way young people relate to and interact with their neighbourhood. Photographs of graffiti and floral tributes created in memory of those who had met with tragic deaths often linked to youth violence and knife crime, led to in depth discussions about community safety. The ability of participants to build local trusting networks was impacted by safety concerns, particularly the threat of violence and racist abuse as they manoeuvre the locality.

Young people acknowledged how, particularly for women, fear of crime and the expectation that neighbourhood spaces need to be carefully negotiated has become normalised. Some local places were renowned for drugs and muggings. Tales were told of stabbings, knife and acid attacks, machetes found in undergrowth and drug dens in parks, creating a strong sense of uncertainty and threat.

> 'You remember when they found a crystal meth lab on the heath. It was deep in like, deep inside the heath .. just like this white tent and no one paid any mind to it until someone like actually thought to question it. And they were making crystal meth inside (Camden YP).

Young people got around following carefully planned routes, accounting for and avoiding areas where gangs were known to lurk or where street lighting was poor. This insecurity was accentuated both by race and gender and was often a key determinant of an individual's confidence in being able to negotiate outside, public spaces. At times familiarity with an area provided a sense of security, but this was easily jeopardised for example, in the aftermath of Sarah Everard's murder and Black Lives Matter protests.

> See the thing is I don't think anything would make me feel ..comfortable walking around at night, people can say, yes we can get more police, but then you see what happened to Sarah Everard, so it's just like how safe is safe, how safe can we get, to stop attacking women, to stop knife crime? (TH YP).

5. Discussion

This study highlighted the importance of a complex range of structural, relational and economic factors that impact on young people's

> They did like a really nice|{memorial} graffiti, like …around on the walls (Camden YP).

sense of connectedness to place. Class, ethnicity, age, social engagement and cohesion, all appear to play their part in contributing to definitions of self and community identity. Inequalities in relation to the lived experience of the young in inner city London are inescapable and have been accentuated by the pandemic which appears, to have had inconsistent impacts on levels of local community cohesion (International Monetary Fund).

The way society responds to the challenge of inequality is one of the defining public health challenges of our age. Marmot (Marmot, Allen, Goldblatt, et al., 2020) suggests that post-pandemic, rather than 'build back better', we need to 'build back fairer'. He argues that fairer societies benefit from stronger cohesive ties and thus stronger social capital; creating a virtuous circle between reduced inequality and stronger community connections. Finding means to support and strengthen the cohesion within and between communities is one way in which inequalities may be reduced (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2009). Social capital is a useful concept to assist our understanding of how community ties may be strengthened and although not described in these words, access to and use of community networks and relationships was valued by all participants. Community support and local networks fed into the practical, psychological, and social support systems which young people routinely accessed before and during the pandemic. Indeed for some, difficulty in accessing friends, social groups and organised activities during the pandemic had heightened the importance attached to them.

Examples of all forms of social capital were abundant in the accounts collected in this research. Bonding social capital was apparent across families and many other local networks, though was reported to be stronger in older generations who had sought sanctuary in the face of high levels of racist abuse as newcomers to the UK. This sense of insecurity and threat had pushed first generation migrants together into supportive homogenous ethnic groups. In so doing bonding social capital has been seen to 'establish spaces of encounter' (Wessendorf, 2013) from which more heterogeneous relationships can be forged (Kindler et al., 2015). As such, it has been suggested that bonding social capital may be an important step in the ultimate creation of bridging social capital which in turn results in a mix of both weak and strong ties. It is this network of links and associations across groups which is believed to result in better quality social networks with the potential to impact positively on the individuals involved (Kindler et al., 2015). Our findings show that as young people in deprived areas of the inner city become more independent, they develop more heterogenous ties across different groups and networks spanning a greater range of ethnicity, class and religious groups, than appear to be present in their parent's generation. It is these ties, often deemed to be 'weaker', residing across 'outside' groups, which may offer young people opportunities to access new and aspirational opportunities. Ties which are able to create 'bridges' between groups are essential for integration into wider society, facilitating the flow of information which may not be available to tightly bonded, more insular communities (Granovetter, 1973; Holland, 2009).

It is apparent however that local policies, especially post pandemic recovery policies, need to focus on ways to build trust and engage the young. Participants living in areas of socio-economic inequalities were not persuaded by the rhetoric of local regeneration policy that asserts that those in more deprived communities will be looked after. The normalisation of crime and fear experienced routinely by many respondents (particularly girls and people of colour), added to a sense of community dislocation and should be considered alongside evidence that where people feel unsafe, neighbourhood disorder is found to be higher and social cohesion lower (Minh et al., 2017). The structural deprivation of some of the study areas was plainly visible, and was narrated by participants using their own photos showing gleaming new state of the art buildings juxtaposed against dilapidated housing stock. Commentators have explored how those living in areas high in relative deprivation (i.e. where there is a significant income divide between residents living alongside each other) can suffer both poorer health and social outcomes (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2009). Sen, provides further insight, suggesting

how relative inequality with respect to income leads to absolute inequality in respect to capability (Sen, 1995). In other words, it is not what you have that is important, rather what you can do with what you have – and this is influenced by factors including the social capital we have access to.

Despite inequalities, in instances where young people felt connected to the neighbourhood or certain networks within it, a sense of visible pride in community was evident, penetrating deeper than the decaying buildings. Yet, whilst community resilience may play a part in overcoming adversity, a chasm in opportunities remains. The considerable gap in life expectancy between different wards within the three boroughs where this work took place illustrates this point. In Camden, for example, men living in the most affluent ward can expect to live 12.9 years longer than those in the most deprived wards; a stark reminder of how concepts of an 'us and them' society establish and are hard to tackle despite decades of government policy. Significantly Alexiou et al. (2021) show how large reductions in local government funding in England between 2013 and 2017 are linked to decreasing life expectancy and how in the years between 2013 and 2017 funding reductions were greater in more deprived communities. Also relevant is a compelling analysis (Popay et al., 2021) arguing that focussing exclusively on local issues creates an 'inward gaze', encouraging stakeholders to believe responsibility lies entirely within the community. Localism may have a tendency to obscure the impact that national policies and structures have on local inequity.

The relationship between young people, local government and particularly their mistrust in local development plans, is reflected in the way participants had little confidence in local governance processes. This suggests a deficit of trust across hierarchical boundaries and a dearth of linking social capital. The less power an individual feels to drive change, the more disenfranchised and mistrustful they become – a finding supported by a YouGovUK survey (2019) which reported 37% of young people felt their vote didn't matter, compared to a national average of 29%. The concept of trust (both aggregate and individual) is important and has been associated with strong social capital and improved health outcomes (Kawachi et al., 1999). Trust in the state has also been shown to influence levels of political participation enabling policies which are more egalitarian and welfare promoting (Putnam, 2000). If civic engagement is to be strengthened this is an area demanding urgent attention and with this in mind further research into concepts of social capital, particularly as experienced by young people may be informative (Henn et al., 2007).

5.1. Strengths and limitations

Concepts of social capital, discussed in this paper, have been derived from a combination of discussions during walk-about and focus group interviews. Although social capital is used as a focus in the paper the term itself was not used within the workshops and no formal measures of the different components of these terms were developed. Difficulties around clarity of definition and 'conceptual vagueness' for the different forms of social capital have been mooted (Poortinga, 2012) and future work may benefit from defining and testing a set of indicators, appropriate for young people, which can more accurately determine and measure the different aspects of social capital observed in this study.

The methods used in this study were novel and with the benefit of hindsight would no doubt benefit from ongoing development and adaptation. The way participants were recruited for the study, through schools and youth clubs, may have introduced bias, with those volunteering to participate being more likely to value and seek out community connections. Nonetheless it was evident that many of our participants had little prior experience of having their views sought and we would advise future studies, using similar methods, to allow more time to build up the trust and confidence of participants to encourage even greater participation from those who were perhaps initially wary of the research process. Relationships between participants and researchers influenced both the way in which conversations developed and their content.

Life-experience, ethnicity and socio-economic background of researchers will all play a part in determining both interview focus and analytic interpretation. Inevitably, this paper offers a 'partial' interpretation of the narrative of the young people participating in this study with the analysis presented here influenced by our position as white academic researchers (Rose, 1997). Valuable insights may be gleamed from future research of this kind where interview themes and content are compared depending on the degree to which researcher and participants are matched by ethnicity and socio-economic group. We are confident, nonetheless that qualitative insights, such as those provided in this paper, provide important information on which to frame the building of quantitative measures of social capital for young people.

The extent of the disenfranchisement of young people found in this study underlines the importance of finding participatory methods of research design that will promote greater trust and empowerment. The community event held, post analysis, in each of the three boroughs, involved council and community representatives as well as the young people and created an opportunity, welcomed by all stakeholders, for the voice and views of the young research participants to be heard by those creating and implementing policy. The methods used, incorporating a combination of tools and techniques that as far as we know have not previously been used as a sequential package, should be of value in future participatory work, where the focus is on building partnerships and engaging with communities deemed by local government as 'hard to reach'. It is crucial to consider the different backgrounds of young people recruited into such research, paying particular attention to building trust and confidence in those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may have little experience of research or of having their views sought.

6. Conclusion

Recognition of the complexity of people's lives and the importance attached to relational networks may be an important step towards achieving improved understanding of the needs and priorities of the young and thus enable the building of more cohesive local communities. Whilst young people through the pandemic have benefited from, and sought refuge in, online activity and digital social networks (OECD, 2020) this research should remind policymakers of the importance young people attach to physical place and face to face contact. Place-based research and policy needs to continue a dialogue with young people, acknowledging and drawing on existing networks, community assets and cultural beliefs.

The impact of COVID-19 on accentuating existing inequalities in young people means that involving the experiences and creative input of the young is more vital than ever in designing interventions to improve the social determinants of health.

Funding

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Ethics Committee - reference 18007/RR/23506

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no competing interests.

Acknowledgements

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