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Including diverse groups of children and young people in health promotion and public health research: a review of methodology and practice

This research explores which socially diverse populations have been, or might be, reflected in research.

Key words: diversity; health promotion; public health research; children; young people



The research was carried out by the **Institute of Education's Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI- Centre)** in 2008 and funded by the Department for Health.

Key findings

This research is of interest to researchers, research commissioners, funders, journal editors, policy-makers, practitioners and the public.

- A prescriptive *and* a flexible approach are needed to promote diversity. Whilst diversity should always be considered in the research design, the extent to which socially diverse samples are included in research will be shaped by the questions addressed in particular studies. Including diverse groups in research means both conducting highly focussed research with particular groups to ensure that diverse voices are heard, *and* conducting more broadly framed research which genuinely reflects the diversity of the population. In many ways the inclusion of diverse groups goes hand in hand with the conduct of rigorous research.
- There were considerable discrepancies between the framework for good practice suggested by the methodological literature and what goes on in research practice. Many studies do not provide sufficient socio-demographic detail to judge the nature of research samples. For example, more than half of the studies analysed provided no information on the ethnicity of participants. Rationales for sample selection are often unclear, few data collection tools are accessible to those not fluent or literate in English and attention to diversity issues in data analysis appears to be driven more often by convenience than by science.

What we did

For research to be credible, relevant and ethical it needs to reflect the diversity and multi-cultural nature of our society. There is, however, relatively little analysis and guidance for researchers as to how diversity in research might be promoted. This report combines a review of relevant literature with an in-depth look at research practice to examine the extent to which socially diverse populations have been, or might be, reflected in research. The report had a focus on health promotion (HP) and public health (PH) research with children and young people but its key messages are relevant to research in all topics with a range of age groups.

How we did it

The research was conducted in two parts. Firstly, a framework for understanding diversity in research was developed from the theoretical and methodological literature. Secondly, 174 studies included in nine EPPI-Centre systematic reviews were re-analysed to determine how research has addressed diversity issues. The studies included in these nine reviews focused on health promotion and public health research involving children and young people and related to mental health, healthy eating, physical activity, walking and cycling, accidental injury and teenage pregnancy and parenthood. The 174 studies included 53 evaluations of HP and PH interventions and 121 studies examined people's perspectives and experiences using a range of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Implications

- Reports of research should always provide basic demographic details for the sample included in the study (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic position).
- Researchers should consider potential barriers to the inclusion of diverse groups in their study design and employ strategies to overcome these barriers at every stage of the research (e.g. sampling, recruitment, data collection, data analysis).
- It would be helpful for researchers to formally test or report their reflections on whether/how sampling, recruitment, data collection and data analysis methods prevented (or otherwise) the exclusion of particular groups.
- Researchers should be explicit about what motivates their focus on specific groups and/or their comparisons between sub-groups (e.g. existing research literature, ethical or political agendas) and how this motivates sampling and data analysis methods.
- The promotion of diversity requires an ongoing commitment by researchers, and others involved in funding and publishing research, to reflect critically on their own practice.
- Research practice guides and reporting standards should be revised to consider diversity issues.

Click [here](#) for a table listing a more specific set of issues to consider according to broad diversity related goals and the different stages of research.

Further information

For the full report see [‘Including diverse groups of children and young people in health promotion and public health research: a review of methodology and practice’](#)

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