

Research Briefing N° 45

Health promotion, inequalities and young people's health: a systematic review of research

This study describes how much research has focused on fairer ways of promoting young people's health; and what methods have been used to define and measure the differences in health they experience from living in different circumstances.

Key words: health inequalities; health promotion; young people; public health; public involvement in services; public involvement in research



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

These findings are important for researchers, research commissioners, funders, journal editors, policy-makers, practitioners, young people and their families, as well as the wider public.

- Relatively few studies that address differences in health arising from differences in living and working circumstances – health inequalities – also evaluate health promotion or public health interventions. Even fewer evaluate interventions particularly promising for tackling inequalities: structural and environmental interventions, or interventions working through social networks. Most frequently investigated are inequalities between genders and ethnic groups, although often with little thought as to why or how differences might be important. Many methods are used to measure socio-economic status, with little consistency across the literature. These methods include single measures such as occupational class, parental education and income, and multiple or composite measures comprising combinations of these.
- Most intervention evaluations recruit young people through schools or agencies such as social services, frequently excluding the most disadvantaged and disregarding those who drop out before the study is completed. Few studies involve young people or their parents actively in developing interventions or choosing what should be evaluated or how.

- Most intervention evaluations did not explicitly aim to reduce inequalities. Nor could they conclude whether inequalities were increased.

What we did

Health inequalities are recognised as an important problem nationally and internationally. There is policy interest in improving the health of the most disadvantaged, reducing the gap between the most and least disadvantaged, and reducing gradients across the whole population. Health inequalities arise from variations in social, economic and environmental influences along the life course. Health promotion, particularly when it uses social and structural interventions developed by multi-disciplinary teams working with young people, not merely for them, has the potential to reduce health inequalities among young people immediately, and in their later lives.

This study describes how much health promotion and public health intervention research has focused on inequalities in young people's health; and what methods have been used to define and measure inequalities.

How we did it

The research was conducted in two parts: a systematic map and a study of research methods. The systematic map described two sets of studies: health promotion and public health research included in commercial databases which clearly addressed health inequalities; and a register held by the EPPI-Centre rich in intervention evaluations. The methods study described intervention evaluations included in previous EPPI-Centre systematic reviews in areas where young people experience health inequalities (healthy eating, mental health, physical health, teenage pregnancy and teenage parent support).

Implications

There are six promising elements to be combined in an evidence-informed approach to tackling inequalities: **multidisciplinary teams** working in **partnership with the people** they aim to help, to develop **structural and social support interventions** that adopt **inclusive approaches** to delivering and **evaluating their processes** and **impact** on health and inequalities.

Further information

For the summary and full report see [‘Health promotion, inequalities and young people's health: a systematic review of research’](#)

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