

Research is a term used frequently when talking about health inequalities. The challenge for community development practitioners is to use the knowledge we have more effectively.

For many research remains the in domain of academic institutions but there is growing emphasis on the need to engage with and work alongside communities in order to be more effective in addressing the issues which contribute to and alleviate health inequalities. CDHN, over the past number of years, has worked in partnership with the Queens University Centre of Excellence in Public Health this has provided a platform for C&V sector groups and academics to better appreciate each others skills and expertise.

One definition of research in regard to health is “the attempt to derive generalisable new knowledge by addressing clearly defined questions with systematic and rigorous methods”. (DOH 2005) . The term research means different things to different people, but essentially it is about finding effective ways to improve the health and well being.

Jargon busting

Research methods: are the ways researchers collect and analyse information. They include interviews, questionnaires, diaries, clinical trials, experiments, analysing documents or statistics, and watching people’s behaviour.

Data analysis involves examining and processing research data, in order to answer the questions that the project is trying to address. It involves identifying patterns and drawing out the main themes, and is often done with specialist computer software.

Qualitative research: is used to explore and understand people’s beliefs, experiences, attitudes or behaviours. It asks questions about how and why. Qualitative research might ask questions about why people want to stop smoking. It won’t ask how many people have tried to stop smoking. It does not collect data in the form of numbers. Qualitative researchers use methods like focus groups and interviews (telephone and face-to-face interviews).

Quantitative research: researchers collect data in the form of numbers. So they measure things or count things. Quantitative research might ask a question like how many people visit their GP each year, or what proportion of children have had an MMR vaccine. Quantitative researchers use methods like surveys and clinical trials.

Ethics is one of the key principles of effective research standards: the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of participants must be the primary consideration in any research study.

Outcome measures are measurements of the effects of a treatment or service. They might include physical measurements or psychological measurements

Participatory research: is a type of research where researchers and people who use services or carers are partners in a research project. The research addresses an issue of importance to service users or carers, who are involved in the design and conduct of the research, and the way the findings are made available. The aim of the research is to improve people’s lives. This isn’t a research method – it’s an approach to research, a philosophy.

Evaluation: involves assessing whether an intervention is achieving its aims. A project can be evaluated as it goes along or at the end. An evaluation can measure how well the project is being carried out as well as its impact. The results of evaluations can help with decision making and planning.

Dissemination: involves communicating the findings of a research project to a wide range of people who might find it useful. This can be done through: producing reports, publishing articles in journals or newsletters, issuing press releases and giving talks at conferences. It is also important to feedback the findings of research to research participants.

PlayBoard NI Reclaiming Street Play

Since August 2011 PlayBoard have delivered a 'Reclaiming Street Play' project in the Torrens area of North Belfast. PlayBoard have helped local communities research and provide outdoor street play using a variety of everyday accessible materials. A group of young mothers also worked with PlayBoard staff to design, deliver and analyse a community based survey around play in the Torrens area.

The aim of the project was to promote outdoor play and get children outside playing on the streets.

Research findings

Initial findings highlighted a reduction in children's freedom to use the streets as a play space.

"we need safe fun for my children being able to go outside to play in an area that doesn't cater for children without the worry of danger from cars" (Parent)

Key findings show following the project show:

- 95% feel it is very important for their children to play on the street demonstrating a 36% increase from the previous survey
- 71% felt the project had increased children's opportunity to play
- 63% agree that the project has given them ideas for things to do with their children
- 48% are now willing to volunteer on the project as opposed to only 18% in the previous survey

Benefits for parents

Parents were very positive about the project

"I think it's great opportunity for my kids and children in the community to be involved" (parent)

Parents said the project created enjoyment for children, made children happier, nurtured a feeling of safety and that children socialised & made more friends in neighborhoods.

It also gave adults the chance to get to know each other more and created a sense of community. Parents said the play sessions provided valuable time, space and opportunity to bond with their children. The project also fostered a sense of creativity among the children. While giving parents a range of ideas of things to do with their children & sparked ideas around materials to play with.

"my child feels more independent, happier, improved her confidence in getting out & meeting more of the children in the street" (parent)

The clear messages from parents were that streets can become places where children of all ages can interact.

Local young people volunteering

Young people from the area volunteered to help with the project. Feedback from parents from their involvement was very positive.

"Great to see young teenagers get involved with community work" (parent)

Community Based Participative Research

provides the opportunity for those in the research field and communities to work more closely together. At the moment the tendency is to rely on the more empirical and epidemiological information with little engagement or partnership with the community. While epidemiological research is important the participation of the community is too. Community Based Participative Research begins with a research topic that is of importance to the community.

Why it is important communities are involved in research.

Health inequalities are produced by the unequal distribution of power and resources within and between societies. "Knowledge and power are intimately co-constructed, with more powerful players better able to assert the standing and influence of their own knowledge" (Davies et al, 2008). It is therefore important that communities have the opportunity to investigate, construct and share their knowledge, in order to help rebalance the distribution of power.

Communities hold important knowledge, which is often referred to as experiential or tacit knowledge. This knowledge is important for several reasons. Firstly it gives important insight into local context, secondly it is often the driving force behind many community development projects.

Creating and using evidence

It is important to approach any research and use of evidence with a clear idea about what you want to find out.

Critical appraisal helps determine whether the evidence is valid and reliable and the extent to which the evidence actually does what it is supposed to do. Also is important as to the extent to which the results can be applied locally.

Questions to keep in mind - carrying out research

- What do we want to find out? (research question)
- How can we find this out? (methodology)
- What impact will it have? (ethics)

Using evidence

- Has the research been done in the right way?
- Are the research methods and findings relevant to your practice? For example, is the research population appropriate to your area of practice?
- Are the findings transferable to your area of practice?

References

Davis, H. Nutley, S. Walter, I. Why knowledge transfer is misconceived for applied social research Journal of health Service Resource Policy Vol 13: 3