



Combating Social isolation through Creative and Community Engagement: COVID and beyond 'Community COVID'

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Summary of the research

COVID-19 both highlighted and exacerbated societal inequalities disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable members of society. 'Community COVID' aimed to discover how engagement with community resources inspired ideas, stimulated creativity and physical activity, combated loneliness and improved social connectivity during pandemic restrictions. The key focus was to investigate how participants experienced lockdown, self-isolation, and shielding, and assess the positive as well as the negative aspects of activities and their effects on health and wellbeing. A further focus was to evaluate effects of engagement on those who were vulnerable, including economic, physical, psychological, and social vulnerabilities. 'Community COVID' was a collaborative project, funded by the AHRC (UKRI Covid-19 funding) and a UCL Rapid Response grant, and formed from a consortium of academics and people with lived experience, in partnership with Arts Council England, Creative Lives, Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance, NHS Personalised Care and National Academy for Social Prescribing, and Natural England.



Policy recommendations

Lessons learnt from COVID-19 offer new insights into how community assets can be repositioned to support vulnerable individuals facing socio-economic, mental and physical health inequalities; further longer-term research is recommended to determine how equitable access to community assets can be ensured and sustained. 'Community COVID' shed light on how creative and community engagement can address the social determinants of health, such as social connectivity and digital literacy; it is recommended that these interventions are scaled up across the UK to deploy community resources to tackle health inequities. The research found that initiating novel 'creative health partnerships' harnessed the collective power of arts, nature and creativity with health, social care and third sector services leading to new and unexpected collaborations, such as museums, libraries or artists working with food banks or local authority risk registers, and created new ways of working to support vulnerable, marginalised or isolated members of the community. A further policy recommendation, therefore, is the creation of creative health partnerships – ideally within new/emerging Integrated Care Systems - to maximise the benefits of cultural and community assets with a view to addressing the levelling up agenda.



Key findings:

- 'Community COVID' identified hundreds of resources designed to support people during lockdown; some were adaptations of existing programmes though many were bespoke activities developed to address people's needs arising from the pandemic; most targeted isolation and common mental health disorders.
- People participated in online and offline activities, both alone or with others, significantly more often than pre-COVID, but there was uneven and disproportionate access to resources with vulnerable individuals facing profound barriers including unequal access to information and insufficient resources.
- Health and social care professionals felt that their work impacted positively on participant wellbeing, but that they could only express their outcomes through anecdotal evidence or feedback quotes; many felt that impact measurements were not an accurate reflection of their work; others turned to universities for help with evaluation.
- The research showed a strong correlation of loneliness with psychological wellbeing in that as loneliness decreased, wellbeing increased; increases in wellbeing were associated with the extent to which participants felt connected to other people which increased as they engaged with community resources; the more connected they felt, the higher their wellbeing.



"Art allows me to travel in ways I no longer can due to being mainly housebound. There is flow and energy and movement, everything my disability has taken from me."

Further information



Link to 'Community COVID' website:

<https://culturehealthresearch.wordpress.com/community-covid/>

Link to Prof. Helen Chatterjee's blog 'Community COVID and tackling health inequalities': <https://ucluropeblog.com/2021/06/28/how-can-community-assets-creative-health-partnerships-and-social-prescribing-tackle-health-inequalities/>

Link to Dr Rabya Mughal's podcast 'Community COVID, arts and wellbeing', Audio Visual Cultures Podcast:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqp7erVjApY>

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