



Research Briefing

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THE FREE TIME AND LEISURE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

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THIS STUDY into the free time and leisure needs of young people (aged 12 to 18 years) living in four areas in Ireland designated as disadvantaged under the Government's RAPID Programme was funded by the Combat Poverty Agency, with additional funding provided by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin. This research briefing highlights the main research findings and policy recommendations from the study.

Main Findings

▶ **Social Environment**

While describing a strong attachment to their communities, the young people were very aware of their negative characteristics, including high levels of exposure to the use and sale of drugs. There was unanimous agreement among the young people that there are insufficient public and private leisure amenities available to them in their areas

▶ **Involvement in Structured and Unstructured Leisure Activities**

A significant number of the young people attended structured leisure activities within their communities, for example, youth clubs and sports facilities. However, their preferred activity was 'hanging around' on the street with friends

▶ **Age, Gender and Geographical Issues**

As young people moved through adolescence their leisure preferences changed and they moved from structured activities to more casual and commercial forms of leisure. 'Body Image' was the most significant gender issue among the young women and rural youth tended to be disadvantaged in terms of access to youth clubs and leisure facilities

▶ **Involving Young People in Local Planning Processes**

Many of the young people felt excluded by local community development committees, residents' committees and local authority representatives from the planning processes in their areas.

Key Recommendations

- ▶ Consultation with and participation by young people should be a priority for local authorities and local development groups when planning or designing any service or leisure facility for local youth. The resulting provision would then be based on an established need within the community rather than speculative notions of what young people want or need
- ▶ Local authorities should consider developing safe 'youth areas' within the local community where young people can spend their free time
- ▶ Community-based youth clubs should be adequately resourced and supported.



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Background to Study

This study was conducted within the context of widespread recognition of the importance of leisure and recreation for child and adolescent development. Free time and leisure activities afford opportunities for socialisation and peer interaction, have physical and psychological benefits, and reduce the amount of time available for engagement in anti-social behaviours.

Despite Ireland's economic boom, poverty and disadvantage, often spatially concentrated, have been a continuing reality for many young people and their families. Young people from low-income backgrounds can be disadvantaged in their participation in structured leisure and free time activities, whether due to the commercialisation of leisure activities and their own financial constraints and/or a lack of provision of such activities and amenities in their local communities. The social environment - communities, neighbourhoods and social spaces - in which marginalised young people live can influence how they perceive their position in society, their life choices and their future. Public and policy concern with anti-social behaviour by young people in marginalised communities is also influencing where and how they spend their free time with their friends.

Defining Free Time and Leisure

Leisure does not represent a homogenous category of behaviour and there is little consistency in terms of how free time and leisure activities are categorised and defined. However, there is general consensus that free time and leisure activities are freely chosen and non-obligatory in nature. This study broadly defined free time activities as unstructured and informal and usually involved 'hanging around' or socialising with friends. Leisure activities are defined as more structured and formal and usually involved attending organised clubs or groups to participate in activities, for example sports clubs or youth groups

Policy Context

The importance of leisure and recreation for child and adolescent development is highlighted in Ireland's National Children's Strategy 2000-2010. As part of this Strategy, the Office of the Minister for Children is developing a National Recreation Policy for Young People (12-18 years) to follow on from the 2004 National Play Policy for younger children. Young people have been consulted as part of the development process. Understanding marginalised young people's perspectives on their social environments, their engagement in structured leisure activities and their use of free time is vital to inform public policy debates and the development of the recreation policy.

Specific policies and funding programmes have been developed to support young people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and to target young people 'at risk'



in their communities. The Young People's Facilities and Services Fund was established to target young people 'at risk' from substance misuse in areas of social and economic disadvantage by developing youth sport and other recreational facilities. The RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) programme supports targeted investment and co-ordinated integrated service delivery for urban areas designated as disadvantaged, and has provided funding to support the development and building of play and recreation facilities and amenities.

Public order problems and media coverage of anti-social behaviour have catapulted 'problem youth' to the forefront of public debate, centred largely on drug misuse and public drinking among young people. The 2001 Children Act contains many positive provisions in reforming the juvenile justice system, although some have yet to be implemented. The Government subsequently introduced ASBOs (Anti-social Behaviour Orders) in 2006.

Research Method

The research method adopted was a qualitative multi-method approach that comprised a mix of individual interviews and focus group discussions. Baseline data were also gathered using a pre-coded questionnaire. Written consent was sought from the young people and their parents to participate in the study. In total 80 young people aged 12-18 years were interviewed: 37 in individual interviews and 43 in focus group discussions. The young people lived in four RAPID areas: an inner city Dublin neighbourhood; a suburban housing estate outside a city; a neighbourhood within a large rural town; an area within a small rural town community. Individual interviews were also conducted with local youth workers and school staff to ascertain their views on the provision or lack of leisure amenities available to young people in the four areas.

Key Findings

Young People's Views on their Social Environments

" There's nothing else to do so I smoke a bit of hash, get stoned, have a laugh...we end up getting in fights, we end up getting in trouble...we're bored of sitting around doing nothing "

(young woman, suburbs, age 15)

- ▶ While describing a strong attachment to their communities, the young people focused on the negative characteristics of their social environment, including exposure to the sale and use of illicit drugs, public drinking and drunkenness and other anti-social and criminal behaviours
- ▶ The respondents felt ignored and excluded by residents' groups and community development committees within their neighbourhoods and experienced a sense of isolation and marginalisation from the wider society
- ▶ Some of the young people, particularly those living in the urban and suburban areas, reported problematic relationships with local Gardaí.

" Like I'd be out with me friends and we nearly got arrested a few times like...it's very easy to get arrested like...they're [Gardaí] they're all over me and I don't know why. I must have that look or something. "

(young man, large town, age 17)

Involvement in Structured Leisure Activities

- ▶ A significant number of the young people in the study attended structured activities within their neighbourhoods: these included youth groups and sports clubs
- ▶ The majority of neighbourhood youth clubs, particularly in the rural settings, were staffed and organised by community volunteers
- ▶ The youth clubs did not receive any government funding and many of them lacked even basic equipment. Consequently, the young people reported a dissatisfaction with the service provided
- ▶ Teenaged boys were more inclined to be members of a sports club than their female counterparts
- ▶ Some more mainstream youth groups, staffed by professional youth workers, were available to the young people. However, some of the service providers reported difficulties in recruiting young people into these groups
- ▶ Some youth clubs targeted 'at risk' youth and the youth involved in these groups expressed a high level of satisfaction. Many availed of the opportunity provided by attendance to complete their Junior and Leaving Certificates.

" Yeah, it's good, [the club] it's better than standing outside like a fool standing around corners or something, doing nothing "

(young man, suburbs, age 18)

" Like they have a club that I go to and like every few months they bring you out somewhere, or they do have homework clubs and a computer club where you can make cd's or something like that "

(young woman, inner city, age 14)

Involvement in Unstructured Leisure Activities

- ▶ The preferred free time and leisure activity among the study's young people was 'hanging around' on the street with friends
- ▶ High visibility of young people 'hanging around' on the street brought them to the attention of neighbours and the Gardaí

" At night time there's a lot of teenagers hanging around and you're literally outside their houses [neighbours] and they'll come out and roar at ya to move away ... but there's nowhere else to go "

(young man, large town, age 16)

- ▶ Alcohol consumption featured strongly in many of the older teenagers' descriptions of how they spent their free time. There was also a general lack of awareness and understanding among the young people of the potential harm and risk involved in substance abuse

" The best thing is when we're all in the field and we get drunk and just stand around. It's the same every weekend cause there's nothing else to do "

(young woman, suburbs, age 15)

Factors that Inhibit Free time and Leisure Choices

- ▶ There was unanimous agreement among the young people that there is a distinct lack of adequate provision of leisure amenities available to them in their neighbourhoods

" There's a gym up there and it was set up for us, and now if we want to go in sometimes he doesn't even let us... they say 'oh no we've booked it out for adults' but it was set up for us, not for adults "

(young man, large town, age 16)

- ▶ Regeneration has attracted privately-owned leisure complexes into each of the four areas. The majority of the study's young people reported that in many instances local youth have been barred or excluded from using these premises
- ▶ Young people are in many cases reliant on parents for 'pocket money' and therefore often lack the financial means to purchase commercial forms of leisure
- ▶ In general there is a lack of local sporting facilities in the four areas, with many of the young people reporting that there is usually only one local football pitch available to a significant number of young people. Over-use of local football pitches has damaged the grass surface and often renders them unplayable.

" We have training pitches, but there's no lights so we can't train in the evenings and sometimes the trainers can't make it cause they have jobs "

(young man, small town, age 15)

Age-Related Issues

" Like sometimes the older ones do come into our club and they do be messin' and all cause they're not really interested in it and like we do be serious and want to do it "

(young woman, inner city, age 13)

- ▶ The young people identified the need for different and separate leisure activities and facilities for the various age groups
- ▶ Younger teenagers (12-14 years) preferred to spend their free time in structured activities and they also enjoyed spending time with family members
- ▶ Older teenagers (15-18 years) preferred to spend their free time in the company of their peers and reported that the time they spent with their family was obligatory rather than voluntary.
- ▶ Alcohol consumption featured strongly in many of the older teenagers' (15-18 years) descriptions of their preferred way to spend their free time
- ▶ There was a lack of awareness and understanding among many of the young people of the potential harm and risk involved in substance misuse.

" It'd be nice to have somewhere to go like a youth café, somewhere that's not expensive, where you could go to hang around with your friends and play a game of pool "

(young woman, large town, age 15)

Gender Issues

- ▶ The most significant gender issue to emerge from the findings revolves around that of 'body image' among our female participants
- ▶ Young women consistently produced accounts of a societal pressure to conform to a 'Barbie Doll' image
- ▶ Young women were less inclined to take part in any form of exercise, especially in a public setting, because they were self-conscious and embarrassed about their physical appearance
- ▶ Some of the young women often feigned illness to avoid Physical Education (PE) in school.

" I don't like doing sporting activities as I have a weight problem...I don't like people looking at me...I don't like exercising in front of other people. I don't find any bit of sweating and exercising in front of other people...I don't find any of that attractive, I don't find it attractive "

(young woman, small town, age 15)

" I never did it [PE] I'd say I was sick or something...so I used to just sit down and watch them "

(young woman, suburbs, age 15)

Geographical Issues

- ▶ Our findings indicate that the suburban and rural youth have less access to mainstream youth clubs than their urban counterparts
- " I think there should be more to do in the town like cause everything is kinda outside the town "**
- (young man, large town, age 16)**
- ▶ Rural youth reported that they often have to travel outside of their towns to access leisure facilities. They frequently have to access public transport which is sporadic in terms of timetabling, and/or they are dependent on parents for transportation.

" Like if you want to go swimming or even play a game of tennis they're all outside the town. The only way to get there is if your parents drive you, but sure that's not always possible "

(young woman, small town, age 12)

Including Young People in Local Decision Making Processes

- ▶ Many of the young people felt excluded from decision making by local residents' groups, community development committees and local authority representatives
- ▶ Practically all of the young people reported that they were given little or no opportunity to voice their views, opinions or concerns
- ▶ The young people felt isolated and marginalised within their own communities and from the wider society.

" There's no point in putting something in if young people aren't interested cause it'll just go to waste. You have to talk to kids first to see if it's what they want "

(young woman, suburbs, age 18)

" I mean if they spend so much money on setting something up you expect that it should be something that young people would want...if you're not being asked your opinion it's just like you're being ignored "

(young woman, small town, age 15)



Recommendations

Social Environment

- ▶ A specifically targeted drive by local authority representatives and local development committees to ensure the meaningful participation of young people in the regeneration and/or development of their social environments
- ▶ The use of creative means to engage young people in a consultation process, keeping technical language and jargon to a minimum.

Community-Run Activities

- ▶ The provision of financial support to local youth clubs to acquire basic equipment and ensure their continued existence
- ▶ The development of training for local volunteers to include organisational skills, management skills and training in working with youth.

Mainstream and 'At Risk' Youth Clubs

- ▶ The provision of multi-annual stable funding and additional training and support for youth workers
- ▶ The development of links with community-run activities in an effort to provide a holistic service to local youth.

Unstructured Activities

- ▶ The establishment of community-owned leisure and recreational amenities and facilities
- ▶ The designation of safe 'youth areas' within the local community.

Further Research

Additional research needs to be carried out to further our understanding and inform policies regarding the free time and leisure requirements of young people living in disadvantaged areas in Ireland. Young people are a diverse social group whose attitudes and behaviours vary widely, therefore it is vital that policy makers have an in-depth understanding of the local circumstances and situations that young people encounter in their day-to-day lives. There is a great deal to be learned from the accounts provided by the study's young people, and taking their views into account may contribute to a more rounded, thought out and developed understanding and approach to the free time and leisure needs of young people living in disadvantaged communities in Ireland.

Final Word

" I think it's very important, to be asked your opinion, it gives people a certain kind of belief in themselves. They'll start trusting adults a lot more 'cause that's kinda a problem...a lot of them...if older people aren't even gonna listen, listen to you, why should you listen to them? Just because you're younger like...you know you don't treat a child badly, and expect them to treat you nice back. You just don't "

(young woman, small town, age 17)

Further Information

The research on which is briefing is based was funded by the Combat Poverty Agency under their Poverty Research Initiative, 2004 and the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin.

The full research report *The Free Time and Leisure Needs of Young People Living in Disadvantaged Communities* is part of the Combat Poverty Agency's Working Paper Series and is available to download from their website: www.combatpoverty.ie

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