Regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods can improve residents’ mental health

*26 May 2017*

*Community-led regeneration in deprived neighbourhoods can improve the mental health of residents, concludes research by Cardiff University.*

The study - one of the first worldwide to measure changes in mental health during neighbourhood regeneration – found a small but measurable improvement in the mental health of residents in areas of Caerphilly County Borough that underwent community-led regeneration compared to those that didn’t. This was equivalent to one in every three residents in regeneration areas reporting improved symptoms.

There was also a significant trend between length of residence and mental health, suggesting that the longer people resided in areas experiencing regeneration the more their mental health improved.

The neighbourhood regeneration project evaluated was the Communities First programme - a Welsh government initiative to reduce poverty in the 100 most deprived of the 881 electoral wards in Wales. Using anonymously linked data from Caerphilly County Borough Council, general practices and existing studies, 10,892 residents from areas that did and didn’t receive Communities First funding for regeneration were tracked over a seven-year period (2001 to 2008).

Narrowing the gap

According to study lead, Dr James White, Senior Lecturer in Public Health at the Centre for Trials Research and DECIPHer Centre: “The significance of this research should not be overstated. Billions of dollars are spent worldwide on regeneration projects, and very few have been evaluated...

*“Our study shows that targeted regeneration, directed by the residents of deprived urban communities, can help to improve the mental health of residents.”*

[Dr James White, Senior Lecturer in Public Health](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/view/126841-white-james)

“We found Communities First narrowed the gap in poor mental health between the more and less deprived neighbourhoods.”

During the period studied (2001 to 2008), 1,500 regeneration projects were delivered as part of the Communities First programme in Caerphilly County Borough at a cost of £82,857,180.

The type of regeneration projects were diverse and included:

* Crime: installing street lighting.
* Education: teaching assistants.
* Health: provision of sport equipment.
* Housing and physical environment: conducting housing maintenance and repairs and redevelopment of waste land.
* Vocational training and business support: providing computer skills training to the unemployed.
* Community: building community centres.

The study also revealed that before regeneration, residents of Communities First areas were more likely to be: unemployed (3.2% vs 2.5%), sick or disabled (17.1% vs 10.6%), live in rented accommodation (25.8% vs 14.7%), and live in poverty (58.8% vs 43.9%), than residents of control areas.

Unique regeneration program

Dr White added: “The Communities First regeneration program we evaluated is unique in that community residents, rather than local councils or governments, identified areas to be regenerated. The policy implication of this finding is that targeted regeneration, directed by the residents of deprived urban communities, may help to reduce inequalities in mental health.”

The authors hope the research will inform policy to improve mental health and narrow health inequalities at the population-level.

The study [‘Improving Mental Health through the Regeneration of Deprived Neighbourhoods: A Natural Experiment’](https://academic.oup.com/aje/article-lookup/doi/10.1093/aje/kwx086) is published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*.