

East Enders: Family and community in East London



East Enders tells the story of a hundred families who live in two of the lowest income areas in the East End of London, Hackney and Newham. The East End has the biggest concentration of poverty in the capital. It lies at the heart of the Thames Gateway, London's major growth area.



Nearly half the families are lone parents and half are from an ethnic minority background. The authors almost always talk with mothers.



Two thirds of the families live in council rented housing, over which they have very little control, and parents are upset by difficult housing and environmental conditions that they feel powerless to change.



Conditions in these neighbourhoods and for these families are often highly unstable. The families struggle with high levels of crime and a strong sense of insecurity, making them feel vulnerable and 'up against it'. Many want to leave.



Community matters much more to the families in the East End than to the average person. In spite of problems, over half the families felt that they were part of their community and 62% saw signs of it existing even if they were not directly involved. In total 85% of all families were directly connected with the local area and local activity through work, through helping in schools or with other children's activity, being involved in a locally-based group, or taking on a representative or more formal but unpaid role in the community. Many families have a high level of contact with relatives and almost daily contact with neighbours and local friends, creating an informal, largely invisible network of local connections.



A majority of families believe that living in a multi-racial area is positive, particularly for their children's future. Three-quarters of the mothers have friends from other ethnic backgrounds and almost all their children do. Within the potentially fraught arena of rapid racial change, the idea of community is extremely important to 90% of the families.

Further information

This CASEbrief summarises findings from *East Enders: Family and community in East London* by Katharine Mumford and Anne Power, published by Policy Press (paperback ISBN 1 86134 497 X, £19.99; hardback ISBN 1 86134 496 1, £50.00). The book is available from booksellers or from the Policy Press (tel: +44 (0) 1235 465500, fax: +44 (0) 1235 465556, email: direct.orders@marston.co.uk; P&P for UK £2.75 for first book and 50p thereafter, for Europe, £3.50 per book).

Community

Mothers have a particular perspective on life in the city. Many small-scale, local and immediate concerns shape and pressurise their lives. For neighbourhoods are where women spend much of their time. Neighbourhoods also help shape their children's life chances. Families depend on friendly faces and neighbours 'looking out for each other'.

In low income areas, mothers with few economic resources and little power to influence major decisions rely heavily on local social relations, contact with neighbours and mutual aid for their survival, security and sense of family well-being. They share this feeling with low income communities around the world.

The families explain community in clear and simple terms: bringing people together, making things work, co-operating, overcoming barriers, seeing familiar faces. The most obvious visible signs of community are simple exchanges between neighbours, but organised community activity also plays a big part. Local community organisations contribute to local well-being and to local attempts at improving conditions in ways that are not normally acknowledged from outside. They help protect families from wider problems.

Michael Young and Peter Willmott's famous 1950s book, *Families and Kinship in East London*, uncovered strong family ties, predictable work and intense local networks, albeit with social patterns changing over time. Today, social relations are far more uncertain, with many newcomers and a strong exodus of more established residents.

Ethnic change

Kurds, West Africans and East Europeans are among recent arrivals into traditionally white working class East End areas. Racial tensions are sometimes high and it is clear that almost all families, whatever their origins, are acutely conscious of their changing community and the competition for space and other resources, such as housing, schools, jobs and state benefits. Racial harassment, including severe intimidation and physical attack, is four times more common in these neighbourhoods than elsewhere.

Some white families feel squeezed by the population shifts, particularly on the housing front because of difficulties in gaining a transfer to better housing, wanting but failing to get housing near family members, failing to exercise the Right to Buy because they worry they won't be able to sell or afford the new prices. Many see homeless newcomers getting priority over them, even when they've waited a long time and their needs are urgent. They are also worried about schools when they see white children rapidly becoming a minority. Black families also worry about their neighbourhoods becoming "majority minority", and about large numbers of newcomers putting additional pressure on resources.

It does not appear to be true that attachment to community disintegrates in a global age, in a global city, with fast changing populations, strong cultural and ethnic differences and many other alienating pressures. But the scale and speed of change in the ethnic patterns of the neighbourhoods puts intense strain on fragile social networks and already over-stretched community resources.

Work

Although one third of the families have no earner (predominantly lone parent families), nearly 60% of adults in the families are employed – including half the mothers. Many employed mothers (58%) work full-time, over two thirds have reasonably steady, if not well-paid, jobs and a third have undertaken training, despite having left school with few

or no qualifications. 43% of all mothers were not employed at the second interview, including three quarters of those with pre-school children. But 40% of those at home want to work. Mothers found work a pressured juggling act and most worked fairly locally because of children. Many mothers preferred informal, known childcare to more formal 'qualified' help.

The work trajectories of mothers range from successful professional and semi-professional careers for under a quarter to a mixed bag of low paid and casual jobs for nearly a third. In between there are many women moving from very low skill jobs into practical caring and support jobs in new and established services, often related to local public interventions. These 'paraprofessional' jobs tap the informal skills of poorly trained residents, in order to support professional services such as education and health in those same areas. But the mothers filling them remain low paid and often undervalued. Many mothers in work showed themselves to be keen learners, ambitious and aware of the wider changes and opportunities of the job market – particularly in caring services.

The work pattern of mothers at home is significantly more "patchy" than the mothers in work – 80% had done only very low skilled or intermittent work. Nearly half want work but the level of job open to them is a big barrier compared with the security of benefits. They are terrified of debt and in effect trapped on low incomes through lack of qualifications or reliable childcare. The links to child poverty are strong.

Three changes would make most difference to women's work in these neighbourhoods: more training; better work conditions and proximity of jobs; better childcare.

Neighbourhood disorder and crime

Neighbourhood environments pose the most serious problems to families. Litter is an overwhelming problem. 40% dislike the appearance of their area, almost double the London average. Parks and public spaces are often a focus for anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. Many parents were worried about peer pressure and local gangs occupying public spaces. This inevitably encroaches on families' desire to use them, setting off a downward spiral of withdrawal, loss of control, abuse and further withdrawal. The families' strong desire for more supervision underlines the importance of order and protection of open spaces in urban neighbourhoods. Yet, parks and open spaces are an extremely valuable communal resource, often providing the only outdoor play space for children. Even when families identify serious shortcomings with their local parks, 84% still use them.

Two-thirds of our families feel that crime is a serious problem, four times the national average. Nearly 40% had experienced crime directly in the previous 12 months. Most worryingly, five children had been attacked, two at knife point. The police response to actual crime was more often good than bad but parents complained about lack of street policing and often did not report crime because they felt the police could do nothing.

Drugs, particularly in Hackney, were a serious problem, setting a troubling example to children and young people, impacting on families through unpredictable behaviour, secondary school problems and a generally "shady" atmosphere in some spots. Some incidents were extremely violent, others more trivial. But the many different experiences of neighbourhood disorder suggested a worrying absence of control of street conditions and public spaces, a tolerance of abuse and fear of intervening to stop it, a wider break-down in neighbourhood conditions. Over half of the families directly witnessed these damaging things.

The 'broken windows theory' argues that neglect and decay of neighbourhood conditions generate a spiral of crime and disorder by signalling lack of care or control. There are strong links between physical disorder, actual levels of crime and the fear and insecurity they engender. This matches what the 100 families said. For the kind of problems families told us about could not be dealt with by individual families or community groups unaided. Managing the collective conditions of urban neighbourhoods is a task that requires overarching authority, co-ordination and ground-level street care. Unless city neighbourhoods are more secure, family and community cannot survive.

Neighbourhood prospects

Families are very worried about rearing their children in inner city neighbourhoods. Transport, leisure facilities and shops are more accessible than in many other places. But mothers are much more dissatisfied with almost all other local services – four times more so with the general environment.

Most families have a mixed view of the prospects for their neighbourhoods, believing that physical conditions are getting better but social conditions are getting worse, and aggressive and anti-social behaviour is increasing. The pace of change, the close proximity of extreme wealth in the city and the struggle to survive all create an anxiety in mothers that undermines the "community spirit" that is so crucial to them.

Yet intense though the problems in Hackney and Newham are, these neighbourhoods are not on the brink of collapse. On the contrary, there are many positive signals – house prices, school performance and employment opportunities all have upward trajectories. There is a visible tug of war between things that are going better – such as schools – and things that feel out of control – such as drug crime. So while too many of our families feel insecure at too many different levels, there is a way forward. More active support for parents, a different way of running council housing, more care of basic conditions, control of nuisance, the enforcement of public standards and more positive policing are urgent tasks. Without these ingredients, the poorest neighbourhoods will continue to lose the families who can go, leaving behind more precarious, more vulnerable communities.

About the research

The author interviewed 50 families in two East London neighbourhoods (100 in total). They were contacted via a variety of sources including: doctors' surgeries, schools, community groups, a church and other interviewees. The selected families broadly reflected the social composition of the neighbourhoods. Most of the interviews were conducted between September 1999 and December 2001 in people's homes. The research is funded by the ESRC until 2007. A parallel study funded by the Nuffield Foundation is underway in Leeds and Sheffield.