

Talking to Families in East London


Katharine Mumford reports on her first round of interviews with 100 families living in two East London neighbourhoods. CASE's qualitative, longitudinal study in low income areas seeks to understand area change from the perspective of families, and to uncover the significance of area conditions in people's lives.



The first report documents views on neighbourhood problems and strengths, children's education, and the direction of change.



Dissatisfaction with the areas was high. 22% of the families interviewed in 'East-Docks' and 30% in 'West-City' were dissatisfied with their area, compared with only 13% nationally. Dissatisfaction with accommodation (30%) was three times higher than the national average (9%).



The families often felt that their neighbourhood had severe problems. But they were optimistic about progress they were seeing in physical improvements, community facilities, schools, and (in one neighbourhood) transport. Overall, 48% thought that the neighbourhoods were improving. Nationally, 10% say that their area improved in the previous two years. We do not know whether these East London neighbourhoods will continue to improve, but the level of optimism is striking.



Parents of school-age children believed that many of the primary and secondary schools were getting better, including stronger leadership, more homework and improved discipline.



Over half of the families spontaneously raised the issue of race; both neighbourhoods are increasingly ethnically diverse. There were more positive or neutral comments than negative comments about race relations in the neighbourhoods.



About the same proportion as nationally (48%) thought their area had a lot of community spirit. Community spirit mattered to nearly three quarters of the families. Many wanted more community spirit and missed it when it was not there.

Further information

A detailed account of this research can be found in *Talking to families in East London: A report on the first stage of the research* by Katharine Mumford. Copies are available from Jane Dickson, CASE at the address below or can be downloaded from our internet site: <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/Case>.

The neighbourhoods

West-City is situated on the edge of the City of London. East-Docks is on the edge of the new Docklands developments, which continue to be extended eastwards all the time.

Both areas are predominantly made up of council housing. They were both devastated by the loss of key local industries from the mid-1960s onwards. West-City lost its traditional manufacturing businesses, whilst East-Docks suffered the closure of the docks and associated industries. In these neighbourhoods, the proportions of lone parents and of the working age population not in work, study or training, are higher than London averages and far exceed national averages.

Both were mainly white, working class communities until the 1980s. Their racial composition has changed rapidly.

Parts of West-City are becoming very trendy. House prices are high by national standards, and prices for flats are close to the Greater London average despite the area's deprivation. The night-time economy is flourishing. This sometimes causes problems for local residents. New Deal for Communities is injecting significant resources.

In East-Docks, house prices have also risen, but remain lower than in many parts of London and about half those in West-City. The area has recently been connected to the London Underground. East-Docks has more houses and fewer flats than West-City. Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding started in 1996, and the area is part of an Education Action Zone.

Dissatisfaction

22% of the families interviewed in East-Docks and 30% in West-City were dissatisfied with their area, compared with only 13% nationally (*Survey of English Housing, 1997/98*). When considering the areas as a place to bring up children, dissatisfaction increased further. Families' worries for their children often included: negative peer pressure, safety, drugs, pollution, lack of facilities and paedophiles. 26% of the families interviewed in East-Docks and 34% in West-City were dissatisfied with their accommodation, compared with only 9% nationally. Families living in flats often described the difficulties they encountered in bringing children up without their own outside space.

Many families felt fearful of crime: *"You've just got to be on guard all the time. With gates on your doors, it's like you're in prison."*

Children's freedom

The vast majority of parents in both neighbourhoods felt their children had less freedom to play outside than they'd had in their own childhood because dangers had increased. This was the case for parents who had always lived in the neighbourhoods, for those who had grown up in other parts of England, and for those who had grown up in other countries.

People talked about the increase in supervised children's activities (such as going swimming). This could be seen as either a positive increase in opportunities, or as a defensive reaction to perceived dangers in the unsupervised environment.

Many parents felt as this mother did: *"I'm frightened for my kids. I can't keep them trapped in this Close all their life. I want them to be able to trust in the world. But the way it's going is frightening."*

The direction of neighbourhood change

Alongside high levels of dissatisfaction, families expressed a lot of optimism about the direction the neighbourhoods were moving in. Just over a half of the West-City families, and 44% of East-Docks families felt their neighbourhood was improving. Only 16% of families in typical deprived areas targeted for government programmes, and 10% of families nationally, felt their area had improved in the previous two years (*MORI survey for the DETR, 96/97; SEH 95/96*). In the

neighbourhoods we are studying, these improvements are only just starting and we do not know whether they will continue. However, the level of optimism among the families about physical improvements in particular is striking.

The main positive changes the families identified were: physical improvements, better community facilities, the regeneration efforts underway and (in East-Docks) better public transport. People often felt their neighbourhood was starting from a low base, and that much more remained to be done, particularly to tackle social conditions. But they were optimistic about the progress they were seeing.

“East-Docks is looking up – it’s shaping up – it’s changing its image.”

“It’s encouraging that people are getting their own businesses in West-City. I don’t like the fact that people are trying to open up discos, but I think the area is progressing.”

School improvements

Parents of school-age children believed that many of the primary and secondary schools were getting better in all sorts of ways. They identified improvements in school leadership, teaching, results, discipline, translation, activities on offer, image and homework. As with the areas as a whole, parents often felt that more improvement was needed, but most of the schools seemed to be on the right track.

“It’s a brand new school, with brand new attitudes. I would love to have gone to a school like that. I will start evening classes there in January.”

“Academically they’re progressing. They’re being given homework – I like that.”

“The headmaster is more for the school, the kids and the parents. He has done a lot to turn this school around – bring it up from the bottom. He has brought funding in. He always makes time for you if you have a problem.”

Race relations

A majority of the families (28 in each neighbourhood) raised the issue of race – in relation to neighbourhood change, and also in answer to questions about what they liked or disliked about their area, their reasons for moving, schools, and their children’s future. There was a mixture of views, with more positive or neutral comments than negative comments in relation to the areas.

Some black and ethnic minority families talked about how they had either witnessed or directly experienced racism. Some white families talked about feeling *“racially outcast”*. Both black and white families sometimes felt aggrieved about lettings, feeling they had been unfairly treated. The opacity of the lettings system contributed to this.

On the positive side, black and white families talked about how pleased they were to be bringing their children up in a multi-cultural environment: *“The good thing is that my children are being brought up with a lot of different ethnic minorities.”*

Community spirit

Community spirit mattered greatly to many people. Around a half of the families (just above the national average) felt that their area already had a lot of community spirit: *“People rally around a lot. They help each other. It’s a close-knit community.”*

There was a strong desire for more community spirit. Far more (nearly three quarters) felt that community spirit mattered, than felt it existed. Most wanted to feel at least informally connected to neighbours, to experience friendliness, and to know that there were people nearby who they could turn to if necessary. There was a real sense of missing it when it was not there.

“You just shut your door and come in. It’s not like it used to be – everybody talked to everybody. The only time you see your neighbour now is if something’s wrong. You put Christmas cards in, you say hello, but you don’t go in for a cup of tea or anything.”

Families’ ideas about what would help

The families were asked what things they thought would help them most – these could be either things to do with the area as a whole, or things to do with their individual families. The top three in both neighbourhoods (though in slightly different orders) were:

- More facilities for children of all ages including supervised play areas and parks with wardens, somewhere for teenagers to go, and better childcare facilities.
- Better accommodation for the family.
- More money, to get a job, to get a better job, or to be assured of job security.

Four families replied that they were content because of their happy family life. In the words of one: *“We are very happy. We love each other, respect each other – we’re rich that way.”*

Continuing research

The second round of interviews with the same families was completed in November 2000. This research is continuing to explore the interaction between family life and neighbourhood conditions and to record the families’ perspectives on the direction of neighbourhood change. Will the initial area and school improvements be sustained? Can the more difficult social problems be tackled? The study will continue to be embedded in CASE’s Disadvantaged Areas Study which is monitoring how the areas’ socio-economic indicators change over time.

There may be specific London-factors at work. For example, the pressurised property market which (until recently) has been raising values across the capital, may help explain why alongside a high level of dissatisfaction with existing conditions, many people felt their area was improving. In future reports we will compare results from East London with emerging findings from our new Leeds/Sheffield study.

Conclusion

Rather than being clearly ‘in’ or ‘out’ most of the London families seem to cope, often in the face of serious difficulties. Social exclusion is not about categories of people, but about constraints and opportunities. We will continue to investigate the hurdles and supports, barriers and routes to opportunities the families encounter. Some are personal, others lie beyond people’s front doors.

About the research

The author interviewed 50 families in each of two East London neighbourhoods (100 families in total). They were contacted via a variety of sources including: doctors’ surgeries, schools, community groups, a church and other interviewees. Most of the interviews were conducted between September 1999 and February 2000. The respondent was usually (but not always) the mother. The research is funded by the ESRC. A parallel study funded by the Nuffield Foundation is underway in Leeds and Sheffield.