Structurally unsound

Actions for Researchers

Exploring Inequalities: Igniting research to better inform UK policy
The research community has undertaken significant and extensive work towards developing a better understanding of inequalities, how they are evidenced, are cumulative, and how they are experienced across the UK.

Discussions throughout the project recognised the gains that have been made as a result. However, key evidence gaps and areas for further exploration were also highlighted. These are summarised in the actions that follow.

We don’t set out specific interventions or policies that will ‘fix’ inequality. Instead, we suggest actions and considerations that researchers and their research questions could adopt to better approach the study and analysis of structural inequalities. These follow the five approaches outlined on page 52 in our main report.

- To provide deeper understanding of cross-cutting issues and intersectional disadvantages for the benefit of policy and practice, researchers should be incentivised to work outside of disciplinary silos and challenge themselves to analytically and conceptually bring together work on social inequalities.

- Currently there is no framework to draw together academic work on aspects of inequalities. There is a need for cross-institutional working to share learnings, evaluate initiatives and undertake collaborative work. Regional research hubs and university clusters would ensure that single universities do not keep best practice to themselves.

- There is a need for better methods and research questions as a point in and of themselves. Research and policy should work in partnership to develop research agendas that are co-designed with groups experiencing structural inequalities. Research cultures, grant award panels and ethics boards should also be more representative and diverse.

- Language matters. Researchers and disciplines should be more explicit about definitions used to evidence inequalities and consider adopting common terms across research domains. Use of multiple terms (for example, ‘inequality’, ‘injustice’, ‘poverty’, ‘social mobility’, ‘widening participation’) makes sharing and analysis across datasets extremely difficult. Consideration should be given to what is lost by researchers using different terms without explanation or common conception, talking across one another, and whether there is duplication of research effort as a result.

Plugging evidence gaps:

- Researchers should urgently consider how best to future-proof data collection to ensure access to continuous, comparable data. Surveys, data collection methods and research questions should fit changing lives, shifting definitions, for example of mental health, and keep pace with advances in technology and society.

- The research community should be embracing alternative, innovative methods for capturing data and researching intersectional inequalities. Adopting new methodologies could provide opportunities for more sophisticated and impactful
analysis. In particular, computational models could be used to undertake more accurate analysis of which variables are causing inequalities in particular policy areas.

- There is an urgent need to invest in a nationwide longitudinal cohort study. This is needed to address the data gap formed as a result of the last national study being conducted almost 20 years ago. Researchers should advocate for greater investment in longitudinal studies and the importance of the evidence they provide.

Areas for further research:

- It is not known when an intervention needs to be made to improve health outcomes and reduce inequalities. This is a crucial epigenetic point for researchers. For example, research shows that being too cold and/or hungry in childhood impedes cognitive development, so there is a case for intervening to improve living environments, infrastructure and food provision – but at what age the intervention should be deployed is not well understood. Further research is needed into timing of interventions to establish the most effective point in the lifecycle to develop policy and enact change.

- Greater scrutiny should be given to whether researchers are currently asking the right questions with regard to mental health. Surveys to ascertain relative levels of happiness and wellbeing have shown minimal regional variation, despite high regional variation in other measures of health and mental health. This suggests that more consideration should be given to the interchangeability (or not) of terms such as ‘mental health’ and ‘wellbeing’.

- An evidence gap exists around establishing contemporary lived experiences of working-class children and adults, especially for minority ethnic groups. For example, working-class voices are under-represented in education research – with the everyday experience of working-class pupils and their perspective and perception of teachers, lessons, exams and future prospects often omitted. To avoid research being carried out on, rather than with, low-income groups, greater emphasis on genuine research partnerships is required.

- There is a lack of reliable data in how state schools can provide better access to external opportunities and cultural capital. Some state schools perform much better than others overall, even when school intake is considered. Studying examples of success in greater depth could provide crucial insights for policy.

- There is a severe lack of data on the Further Education sector, and the links between Further Education, apprenticeships and future employment opportunities. Employers and researchers need to work in partnership to establish greater understanding of school-to-work routes and barriers to progression, e.g. sixth form versus Further Education, and academic versus vocational, and not in education, employment or training (NEET).
There is a lack of research at the intersection between equality of outcome as an individual leaves the education system and enters employment, specifically in terms of values (other than income and employment status) accrued from achieving certain qualifications. More work is also required to understand why certain ethnic minority groups are doing well with regard to educational attainment, but this isn’t being reflected in the employment market.

There is a growing need for research to fully explore choice constraint. Given the disproportionate and increasing number of BAME individuals in self-employment and the gig economy, assessing why they made this move is important to better understand the changing shape of the labour market and structural inequalities within it. Undertaking qualitative research is crucial.

Recruitment agencies are currently under-researched ‘middlemen’ in the UK employment landscape. There is a need for more research into their role in perpetuating and/or tackling social inequalities.

In order to understand costs and impacts of those dependent on housing benefit and why fewer people on lower incomes can access social housing, greater evidencing is needed of the longer-term impacts, for both societies and individuals, of inequality in the housing market. Researchers should also work with data to control for other factors in order to focus in on how housing inequalities manifest for disadvantaged demographics.

In addition, greater research focus should be placed on examining distribution of housing across the life course. In particular, housing and mental health is an under-explored area of research with very little life-course evidence for the types of housing people inhabit.

More broadly, further work would be welcomed to assess public attitudes towards inequalities – for example establishing whether certain types of inequality are regarded as more acceptable than others? Greater work is also needed to assess the extent of public understanding of the term ‘equality’ itself.

Areas for research-policy collaborations:

Researchers should work with government to better evaluate policies and evidence what works. In many areas, it is not the case that significantly more data or research is needed. Instead, the ‘evidence gap’ exists in identifying, developing and applying effective initiatives to address inequalities. Undertaking systematic evaluation of policies and recognising the long timelines required to evidence policy (in)effectiveness is key. This evaluation should explore the tension between qualitative data being valued in policymaking processes, but quantitative data being the measure of choice for accountability and policy evaluation.

Researchers should aid policymakers’ understandings of the effectiveness of qualitative research in equalities decision making. In addition, improved understanding and clarity about how academia can convey evidence on
inequalities is required. Researchers should be bolder in communicating to policymakers that in many areas we already know enough to act.

- The research community should develop an improved understanding of the types, and nature of, data the government holds – its presentation, access, the fact it is not archived as it is operational, and the legal constraints around not making data immediately available.

- To develop an improved understanding of the measures to tackle structural inequalities, those working in research institutions should be encouraged to collaborate with policymakers to further explore initiatives, develop robust evidence bases and evaluate policies.

- More broadly, greater research is required into what inclusivity in policy would look like and how intersectional inequalities can be addressed within a broad strategic portfolio of policy measures.

- Devolution and localisation offers opportunity for researchers to more closely communicate with policymakers. This provides scope for developing a place-based approach to tackling inequalities. Careful consideration is needed around research recommendations to ensure inequalities are at the centre of the agenda.

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