

# Reports from the Programme conference

## Area influences

### Who you are or where you live, which matters more for your health?

**Heather Joshi**

There are wide disparities in health across the UK. These regional and local differences can happen because unhealthy people congregate in particular places, and also because some places are less 'healthy' in themselves. It is often not possible to distinguish such effects of composition and context because data on health are provided by areas, but not for individuals within them.

Our project used evidence on the health of individuals within areas to assess the relative importance of personal and geographical factors in explaining health variations. A major source of evidence was the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study for England and Wales (ONS-LS), where we looked at long-standing illness among men and women in terms of their own characteristics, those of the electoral ward in which they live and the district to which it belongs. We also analyzed sample survey data from the Health and Lifestyle Survey and the 1958 British birth cohort study. In all these exercises, personal characteristics - including occupational background and employment history - were major predictors of poor health, but where you live also made a difference.

Our project has confirmed that the reasons for this lie in many factors: among them climate, economic structure and the strength of the local community.

### The experience of place

**Carol Thomas, Jennie Popay, Anthony Gatrell, Gareth Williams, Lisa Bostock and Sharon Bennett**

This presentation considered what qualitative research can tell us about the influence of areas of residence on health. We all live in particular 'places': can our experience of these places play a formative role in shaping our health status and well-being? The research reported suggests that it might.

People's accounts of the places in which they live convey a strong sense of personal security or insecurity, of belonging or alienation. When people talk about 'the place where I live' they make reference to the features of the physical landscape, to the services, facilities and other resources in the locality, but most of all to the other people who live in the area. These features of locality weld together into people's 'place experiences' and have profound significance for the practicalities of day-to-day life and psychosocial well-being.

The people we have researched live in areas which differ along the familiar criteria of relative 'affluence' and 'deprivation'. We have found that 'place experiences' differ markedly in parallel with these socio-economic signifiers of locality. It is common for people in socially deprived areas to have very negative place experiences.

The presentation illustrated how these variations in place experience can play a key role in generating health inequalities.