



Finalist's case study

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It's normal to have damp:
Understanding energy vulnerability among urban, non-student young adults

About the project

Summary

Fuel poverty is a recognised social problem that affects the health and home comfort of millions of households across the UK. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this research project examined the experiences of fuel poverty among low-income, non-student, young adult households – a demographic group that are disproportionately more likely to be fuel poor compared to any other age group, and yet one which has received very limited attention to date. Findings revealed multiple experiences of and exposure to conditions indicative of fuel poverty, such as: self-disconnection of energy supply, energy debts, cold homes, and unrelenting challenges associated with damp and laundry practices. The main aim of this research, as a small-scale study, was to generate greater discussion surrounding fuel poverty among vulnerable or at risk young people, seeking in part to challenge the 'old and cold' stereotypical portrayal of the issue.

Project partners

This research was an independent piece of work completed as part of a postgraduate research degree; therefore, there were no project partners involved. However, the research has greatly benefited from the support of the supervisory team, Dr Graeme Sherriff and Prof Philip Brown, from the Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit, as well as a local charitable organisation, Salford Citizens Advice.



Profile

- Higher Education
- 23,440 students (includes full and part time students)
- 2500 staff
- Urban





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The results

The problem

In England, almost a quarter of young adults households – those where the oldest member is younger than twenty-five – are unable to afford enough gas and electricity to lead a comfortable and healthy life within their homes. Termed 'fuel poverty', government figures highlight that the risk of living with this recognised social problem is greater for those aged 16-25 than for any other age group. However, despite this increased risk, very little media, policy, political or academic attention has been focused on fuel poor young adult households. A recognition of this gap, not only in terms of research but also regarding the wider fuel poverty dialogue, became the primary motivation for this particular research project.

The approach

Initial stages of the research involved a detailed review of the existing literature. Only one study was found that had specifically investigated fuel poverty and energy vulnerability among young adult households (Bouzarovski et al., 2013). This study, however, largely focused on the experiences of students, illustrating a clear gap in the evidence base represented by vulnerable or at risk *non-student*, young adult households. This became the primary motivation for the research project. In addition, a second motivation related to professional experience gained outside the university. For a number of years, the researcher has held a position at Salford citizens Advice, a local division of the national advice organisation. Experience within this role, as an advisor, illustrated that often younger clients seemingly presented key issues in a different manner. In terms of energy-related issues, such as energy debts, younger clients would often fail to present such issues at the outset, arguably prioritising other matters (such as rent arrears, employment issues, etc.) as more important.

Semi-structured interviews were completed with non-student, young adults who lived independently in Salford, Greater Manchester. Interviewees were asked about their experiences of and attitudes towards domestic energy use, costs, and billing practices, as well as energy-related challenges and vulnerabilities in the home. All participants had previously accessed support from Salford Citizens Advice. To establish an indicator of low-income (one of the key determinants of fuel poverty), a proxy-based approach was used whereby all interviewees had past or current experience of unemployment (and not in education) and/or experience of claiming a means-tested benefit. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using a qualitative psychological approach known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. An innovative methodological approach within fuel poverty research, this analytical framework expresses a concern with how individuals, for whom certain experiences are shared, construct personal meaning and make sense of their lived experience within particular contexts.

Performance and results

Detailed discussions of the findings were presented within the final thesis (submitted in November 2015) under three emergent themes: 'establishing the independent home', 'threats to home comfort' and 'energy and coping'. The analysis revealed that there were multiple experiences of and exposure to conditions typical of fuel poverty, including: self-disconnection of energy supply, energy debts, cold homes and unrelenting challenges associated with damp and laundry practices. In addition, the interviews revealed that the young adult interviewees attempted to disassociate themselves from narratives of vulnerability, instead adopting language that demonstrates significant levels of resilience and sophisticated mechanisms of coping. While exploratory in



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nature, these research findings have the potential to inform future fuel poverty policy and action targeted towards not only young adult households, but also a range of other 'at risk' groups. Specifically, careful consideration and analysis of the stories told by 'at risk' householders highlights the importance of framing communication in a way that appropriately fits with and responds to the lived experience of fuel poverty.

The future

Lessons learned

1. The power of social media! As a postgraduate student, there has been a wealth of brilliant support and advice from people working in other professions and academic disciplines, but who also work in the same research area. More often than not, however, this has come about as a result of discussions started on social media.
2. Invaluable experience gained outside of studies. Getting involved in local, community based events and projects, and just talking to members of the community, allowed for the development of a broader understanding of the research and the subject area. This is arguably in a way that wouldn't have been possible from books alone.
3. The benefits of taking up as many opportunities as possible to go and tell people about the research - stepping away from just writing about it. Each time, the level of confidence as a researcher grows and something new is learnt about wider interests and the research itself.

Sharing your project

This research was generously awarded one of five Masters Bursaries offered by the Eaga Charitable Trust in 2015, and as a result a copy of the full thesis has been shared on the trust's website since completion. The findings have also been presented at three separate events at the University of Salford; two focused on postgraduate research, and the third as part of a social work seminar series. In addition, an abstract was submitted and accepted to present at this year's British Environmental Psychological Society conference. Further, a full peer-reviewed publication based on the research is currently under construction and will appear in a special 'Fuel Poverty' edition of the Indoor and Built Environment journal in April 2017.

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"Danielle's project embodies the real-world impact of high quality research encouraged for students at the University. As a result of the project, the social impact of fuel poverty in this high risk group is now firmly on the agenda of the Fuel Poverty Research Network and it is just recognition for Danielle to win a coveted Green Gown Award."

Professor Helen Marshall, Vice-Chancellor



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Further information



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