Policy Brief

The Mental Health Impact of Restricted Access to Arts and Culture

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KEY INFO

Research question: The impact on mental health of restricted access to arts and culture in the Liverpool City Region and the value of innovation in arts provision in mitigating associated harms

Policy area or themes:
- Healthcare
- Places and Communities
- Creative Industries
- Arts & Health and Social Prescribing
- Skills and Training
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Methods: Qualitative interviews and online questionnaires

Geographical area: Liverpool City Region

Research stage: In progress

Summary of the research

With some of the poorest mental health outcomes in the country, and one of the richest concentrations of culture in the UK, Liverpool City Region has a pioneering history of harnessing arts for mental health care. Our study examined the mental health impact of restricted access to arts and cultural activities as a result of Covid-19 as well as the successes and challenges of alternative modes of provision. Conducted in three waves at approximately three-monthly intervals between October 2020 and July 2021, we collected data on experiences of arts/cultural organisations and their beneficiaries (i) during full lockdown, (ii) when restrictions were first lifted, and (iii) after full restrictions easing. We found that, as one of LCR's most important economic and social assets, the arts and culture sector can play a major role in improving mental health outcomes across the city region, if properly integrated into public health strategy.

Policy recommendations

1.Support sustainable partnerships between health and arts providers
Building on successful cross-sectoral cooperation between arts and cultural organisations and regional health and social care providers will facilitate wider provision and maximise the value and reach of these services, as well as producing new opportunities for training care staff to deliver interventions.

2.Co-ordinate local initiatives
Arts and cultural organisations need to co-ordinate services and share best practice, pulling together the talents, experience and good will of local initiatives in meeting essential needs so that they can be scaled up and targeted more efficiently.

3.Maintain alternative/hybrid provision of arts and cultural activity

Hybrid offerings are critical both for rebuilding capacity in the creative industries, and for the mental health of the region's population, enabling inclusive accessibility for vulnerable people alongside in-person events that boost community connectedness.

4.Train all stakeholders in digital knowhow
There is an urgent need to evaluate which online arts and cultural services are working, why and for whom they are working, and to provide skilling-up of both workforce and beneficiaries. This is just as essential as the provision of equipment and internet access.

Key findings
Interviews with 15 LCR arts and cultural organisations and online questionnaires with arts' audiences/beneficiaries identified:

- Highly collaborative/imaginative response from the sector
  Arts/cultural organisations in LCR responded rapidly and creatively to the pandemic, offering online programmes as a lifeline for vulnerable and isolated people and innovating their own services.
- New partnerships
  Arts/cultural organisations have been most effective in reaching vulnerable, isolated and disadvantaged populations at risk of mental health issues when they have worked in close collaboration with social and mental health care providers.
- Vital importance of hybrid provision
  While some are keen to return to in-person events, the sense of risk is strong for others. Online provision remains vital for those with health conditions or vulnerable family members. Arts/cultural organisations are exploring creative means of integrating online and in-person provisions.
- Clear benefit to wellbeing of regular arts/cultural engagement
  Those who engaged in arts and culture frequently during lockdown had significantly higher wellbeing scores than those who engaged in arts and culture 'never' or 'rarely'.
- Digital literacy and access
  While audiences appreciate the option of alternative provision, barriers to online inclusion (cost, accessibility)

are exacerbating a gr digital divide. Arts/cultural organisations need expert support on platforms and products, safeguarding procedures, effective staff training.
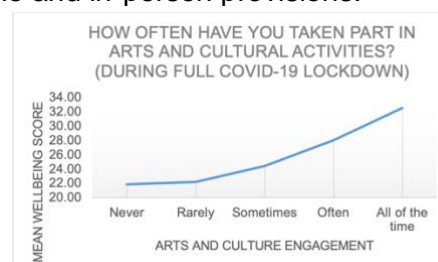
Further information
Our webpages carry details of the project and partners, https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/english/research/featured-research/covid-19-care/
and monthly blogs in respect of our findings
https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/english/research/featured-research/covid-19-care/news-blog-publications/
which are disseminated via our project Twitter account @COVID_19CARE

A podcast, Arts, Culture and Mental Health - https://pandemicandbeyond.exeter.ac.uk/media/podcasts/ - the second in a series produced by The Pandemic and Beyond showcases the vital contribution that Arts and Humanities research has made to Covid-19 response and recovery.

Our policy brief - 'The Mental Health Impact of Restricted Access to Arts and Culture' (April 2021), was published in Heseltine Institute for Public Policy's Covid-19 series, 'Responding to Covid-19 in the Liverpool City Region' https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/publicpolicyamppractice/covid-19/PB040,final.pdf

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14.01.2021