Social Isolation and Integration in Blackburn & Darwen

Beyond Imagination Life Survey
ImaginationLancaster

June 2022

Executive Summary

This report summarises the finding of the **Social Isolation & Integration** case study *proposed by Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.* In the analysis of the data collected from 1,300 people in Blackburn with Darwen the following key findings were established:

Isolation focus:
- 15% of respondents felt close to others rarely / none of the time and 20% were the sole adult in their household, but the groups from the two candidate measures of social isolation were found to be weakly correlated.
- Infrequently feeling close to others was concluded to be a better measure of social isolation and was found to be strongly correlated with mental and physical health and lower household incomes.

Integration focus:
- Over 80% of respondents felt a (very) strong sense of belonging to their local area.
- There was a positive sentiment between communities, with over 80% of respondents feeling that people from different backgrounds get on well.
- While Covid-19 has caused 30% of neighbours to get to know each other better, it has also had a negative impact on 50% feeling uneasy about mixing with new people.

Background

Lancaster University, Lancaster City Council and Blackburn with Darwen Council have come together to initiate the Beyond Imagination Life Survey. Commissioned by Lancaster University and undertaken by BMG Research the survey of just under 3,000 residents aims to gather a representative picture of views, attitudes and experiences, which will in turn inform strategy, activities and research opportunities for ImaginationLancaster, the local authorities and other local partners.

Lancaster City Council and Blackburn with Darwen Council priorities have formed a key part of the survey development throughout, resulting in a survey structure which combines the needs of different stakeholders, based on four themes:

- Health and Wellbeing
- Wealth and Opportunity
- Sustainability, Transport and Travel
- Connected Communities and Services

Bringing the data to life

Connected Places Catapult were commissioned to develop an interactive data dashboard solution to explore and visualise the Life Survey data, and to enable future interactive data analysis, research and visualisation. To this end, a series of case studies have been produced by Connected Places Catapult based on research themes developed with the project partners in Beyond Imagination workshops.

Introduction

This is the report for the Social Isolation & Integration case study for the Beyond Imagination Life Survey created by Connected Places Catapult in collaboration with ImaginationLancaster and Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council. The results and findings presented here were extracted from the analysis and visualisations produced in the Social Isolation and Integration Dashboard. The case study was broken into two focus areas around isolation and integration.

Social Isolation and Loneliness – Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council (Isolation Focus)

The 2013 Integrated Strategic Needs Assessment included a chapter on Loneliness and Isolation in Blackburn with Darwen. It reviewed a wide range of people, including consideration for living environment, health needs, social characteristics, religion, transport and digital connectivity. However, it took a focus on residents aged over-50. With the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is timely to refresh, update and expand the scope of this important work. To this end, the Life Survey can be used to explore the measures and correlations of social isolation and the relationship to characteristics such as age, gender and mental and physical health.

Social Integration Efforts, the Pandemic and the Impact on Belonging, Togetherness and Neighbourliness – Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council (Integration Focus)

Blackburn with Darwen is one of five national Integration Areas working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to address social integration. The priorities of the Our Community, Our Future strategy centre on strengthening relationships between the Borough's diverse communities, building connections between young people and increasing economic prosperity for all. To aid in this, here the impact of integration efforts are explored with a focus on sense of belonging, relationships between communities and the effects of Covid-19 on integration.

Methodology

The data in the Life Survey was collected by BMG Research who took measures to increase the representativeness of the participants of the survey. The data collection for the survey consisted of online surveys and (offline) in-person interviews. The anonymised data were securely transferred to Connected Places Catapult, where the data was verified, cleansed and processed using a Jupyter Python Data Science environment, which included the joining to geospatial data provided by Ordnance Survey and Office for National Statistics. The data was loaded into a PostgreSQL database and connected to Apache Superset. Here the dashboard solution was developed, the data analysis was carried out, the dashboards built, and the visualisations created. The Exploratory Dashboard was used to discover relationships in the data, and only then were custom visualisations created for the case study dashboard.

The candidate variables to measure isolation in the Life Survey are how often the respondent has been feeling close to other people (question 35.9 – Q35.9) and if they are living alone (Q60). In total, Q35 is The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) ©University of Warwick, 2006, all rights reserved. WEMWBS was developed by the Universities of Warwick, Edinburgh and Leeds in conjunction with NHS Health Scotland. The combined WEMWBS numerical score can be categorised as low (<44), medium (45-59) and high (60-70). Low scores have been correlated with possible and probable depression. Q31 is used to gauge general physical health. Age and gender are extracted from Q2 and Q3 respectively.

The Life Survey asked several questions that targeted social integration: sense of belonging to the local area (Q4), how much neighbours look out for each other (Q5), the relationships between those from different backgrounds (Q6) and the effects of Covid-19 on social integration (Q9). In addition, Q62 can be used to segment by ethnic group.

Results & Discussion

Feeling close to others rarely / none of the time is a better measure of social isolation and has strong correlations with mental and physical health and lower household incomes.

Figure 1a shows that 15% of the respondents (158 of 1020) feel close to others rarely / none of the time. Figure 1b shows that 20% of the respondents (283 of 1299) are the sole adult in their household. However, it was found using the dashboard that there was a weak correlation between these groups from the candidate measures of social isolation. Only 1 in 4 that lived alone reported not feeling close to others, whilst those not feeling close were just as likely to live with another adult as they were to be the sole adult.

Figure 1c shows that there is a strong correlation between feeling close to others and general health. Those that feel close to others rarely / none of the time have high relative shares of (very) bad general health, which was also the case for low WEMWBS scores. With the Dashboard it was also found that roughly 60% of those not feeling close report household incomes under £25,000. In contrast, only 30% of those that often/always feel close are in this income group. This suggests that those on lower incomes are more likely to be socially isolate. However, this relationship is hard to disentangle from the additive incomes of multiple occupancy households.
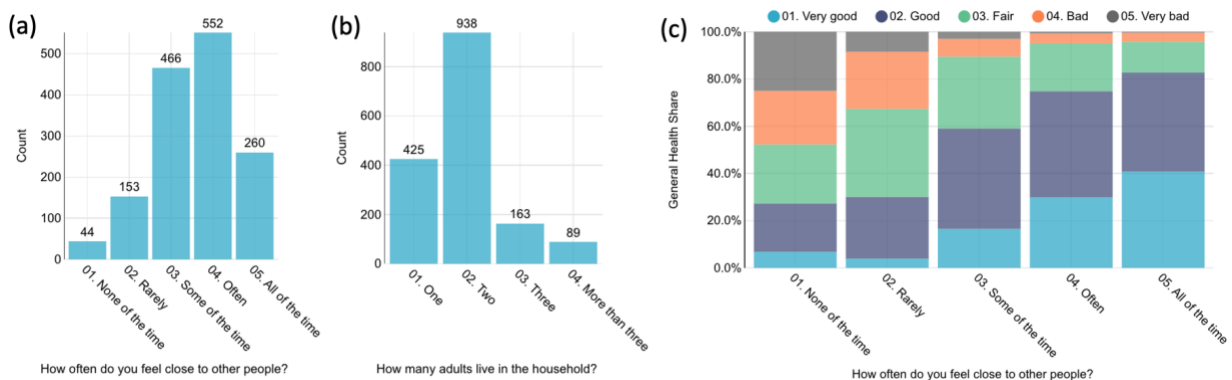

Figure 1: (a) The distribution of how close to others the respondents felt over the past two weeks. (b) The distribution of number of adults in the household. (c) The distribution of general health share for the groups segmented by how often they felt close to others.

Residents of Blackburn with Darwen have a strong sense of belonging to their local area and good relationships with those from other communities.

Figure 2a shows that over 80% of respondents have a strong sense of belonging to their local area. Further analysis in the dashboard also found that 90% believe that neighbours look out for each other. Figure 2b indicates that 80% of respondents from different backgrounds and communities get on well together, and that the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities report better relationships with other groups in comparison to the English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish and British group. These three ethnic groups comprise over 95% of respondents. The mixed effects of Covid-19 are displayed in Figure 2c. This shows that approximately 30% of respondents have got to know their neighbours better, but roughly 50% of respondents are worried about mixing with those they do not know.
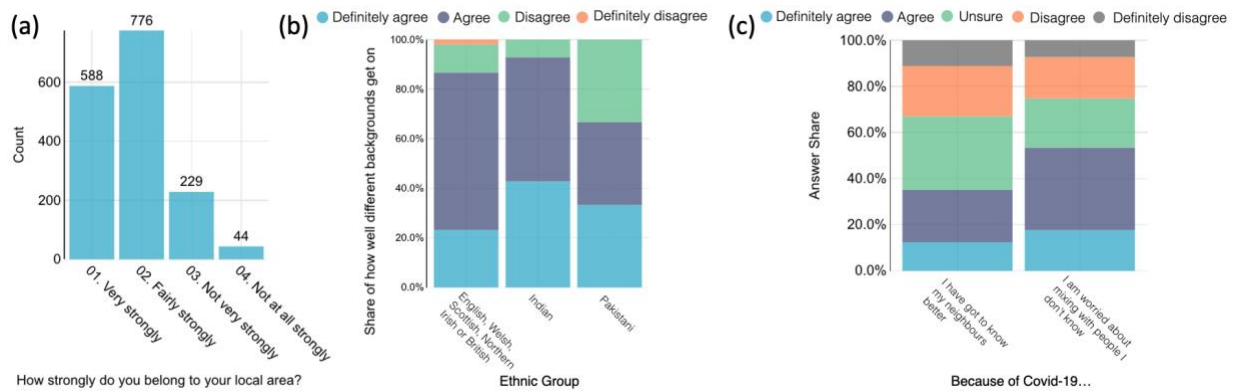
Figure 2: (a) The distribution of sense of belonging in Blackburn with Darwen. (b) The distribution of feeling towards how people from different backgrounds get on share for the different ethnic groups. (c) The distribution of answer shares for questions on the effects of Covid-19.

Outlook

This case study used the Life Survey to investigate the dual social issues of isolation and integration in Blackburn with Darwen. In summary, 15% of respondents reported some level of social isolation, and isolation was found to be correlated with lower mental and physical health and potentially with household income. Social integration levels were found to be high, with over 80% of respondents reporting a sense of belonging, can rely on their neighbours and feel there are good relationships between Blackburn's diverse communities. The key results have been presented here, but further exploration and analysis of the data is possible with the accompanying dashboard. The relationship between isolation and income was hard to disentangle due to income being reported at a household, not individual, level. Future work could resolve this by further segmenting by number of adults or looking at other metrics of income such as Q67 on feeling towards income. A key priority of the Our Community, Our Future strategy is to build connections between young people, and analysis of this priority could be a further extension of this case study. Here care would need to be taken that the segmentation does not result in small sample sizes, leading to uncertain statistics.

Partners & Funding

ImaginationLancaster
Imagination is Lancaster University's cross-disciplinary design research lab. In 2019 ImaginationLancaster was awarded £13.2m for a multi-year project titled Beyond Imagination. Funded by UKRI Research England and led by Professor Leon Cruickshank, Director of Research at ImaginationLancaster, Beyond Imagination explores and demonstrates how cutting-edge design research can create a healthier, more prosperous and sustainable world.
http://imagination.lancaster.ac.uk

Data Science Institute
Lancaster University's Data Science Institute (DSI) supports interdisciplinary data intensive research across the University, with core themes of: foundations, health, environment, society. It has 155 academic members from 19 depts and works with business, government and third sector partners. Current member activities include work understanding the needs of looked after children, links between the quality of the urban environment and health as well as projects in cyber security.
https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/dsi/

Blackburn with Darwen Council
Blackburn with Darwen is a semi-rural unitary borough located in the south east of Lancashire. It has compact urban areas predominately located around the towns of Blackburn and Darwen, surrounded by countryside. These contrasting areas include some of most and least deprived in England. The current corporate plan has the aim of enabling borough residents to achieve a good quality of life in a vibrant and thriving place, with strong community values, in an inclusive society.
https://blackburn.gov.uk

Lancaster City Council
The Lancaster district includes diverse and attractive city, coast and countryside locales. Lancaster City Council's vision is for the district to thrive as a vibrant regional centre in the north west of England. In December 2021 the council set out its four priorities for 2030, along with strategies for how these can be achieved: A Sustainable District, An Inclusive and Prosperous Local Economy, Healthy and Happy Communities and A Co-operative, Kind and Responsible Council.
https://www.lancaster.gov.uk

Connected Places Catapult
Connected Places Catapult is the UK's Innovation Accelerator for cities, transport and places. We provide impartial 'innovation as a service' for mobility and built environment businesses, infrastructure providers and public institutions to catalyse step-change improvements in the way people live, work and travel. We help develop, implement and commercialise the latest technology and innovation for existing markets, as well as create demand and grow new markets in the UK and globally.
https://cp.catapult.org.uk

BMG Research
Established since 1988, we have more than 30 years' experience of working with our clients to build and deepen our understanding of changing and ever more complex markets, people and society. We work with our clients to fully understand the challenges faced by their organisations, identify priorities for action, and evaluate the impact of change.
https://www.bmgresearch.co.uk/

Research England
We are responsible for funding and engaging with English higher education providers to create and sustain the conditions for a healthy and dynamic research and knowledge exchange system in the higher education sector.
https://www.ukri.org/councils/research-england/

Appendix

Data sets used

Data Set	Source
Life Survey	Imagination Lancaster
Ordnance Survey / Office for National Statistics Census and Administrative boundaries and postcode lookups	Open Geography Portal

Life Survey questions used

No.	Description
35	WEMWBS mental health score
67	Household income brackets
6	Communities Getting On
62	Ethnic Groups

No.	Description
60	Adults in Household
31	General Health
3	Gender
9	Covid-19 & Integration

No.	Description
4	Sense of Belonging
5	Neighbour Relationships
2	Age

Further details

Respondents that did not respond to a question (answered don't know, prefer not to say, etc) were not included in the analysis. To calculate the WEMWBS score, the responses to each of the 14 survey questions are converted into a 5-point scale that reflect the frequency of occurrence, starting with 1 (None of the time) through to 5 (All of the time). The scores from each question are summed, resulting in an overall WEMWBS score in the range 14-70. These scores can be categorised as low (<44), medium (45-59) and high (60-70).

Data Access Statement

Beyond Imagination Life Survey Dataset
Due to ethical issues, data underpinning this publication cannot be made openly available. Access to the Beyond Imagination Life Survey dataset is restricted to Lancaster University researchers and officers within Lancaster City Council and Blackburn with Darwen Council. Further information about the data and conditions for access are available from Lancaster University's Institutional Repository at: https://doi.org/10.17635/lancaster/researchdata/540

Beyond Imagination Life Survey: Topline Reports and Case Studies
Topline Reports of the Life Survey findings and six case studies created in collaboration with Connected Places Catapult are openly available from Lancaster University's Institutional Repository at: https://doi.org/10.17635/lancaster/researchdata/542

Beyond Imagination Life Survey: Data Dashboard
Due to participant consent obtained for the Life Survey access to the data dashboard is restricted to Lancaster University researchers, officers in Lancaster City Council and Blackburn with Darwen Council. Lancaster University host and manage the data dashboard with access granted on a role-based basis. A password protected log on to the Life Survey data dashboard can be requested by emailing: imagination@lancaster.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

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