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REDUCING POVERTY BY PROMOTING MORE DIVERSE SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE FROM ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS

What's the issue?

There is growing evidence that an individual's relationships – their 'social capital' – can help reduce poverty. For disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds, there is also evidence of a limited but significant relationship between less diverse social networks and poverty.

Ways forward

Policy should focus on nurseries, Sure Start Children's Centres and state primary schools. These institutions are universal and provide valuable services. Promoting greater diversity among those participating in these institutions could enable disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds to develop more diverse social networks.

To encourage more diverse participation in these institutions, we must:

- remove or lessen barriers that discourage disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds from participating;

- ensure these institutions attract families from wider socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

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BACKGROUND

This *Solutions* focuses on new, complementary ways to mitigate poverty through relationships rather than cash transfers. Specifically, it asks whether more diverse social networks mitigate poverty for disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds and explores ways of encouraging such diversity.

For the purposes of this *Solutions*, a 'disadvantaged person from an ethnic minority background' refers to any individual living in poverty from a particular ethnic minority group, including White minority groups.

The views are those of the author, not necessarily those of JRF.

This *Solutions*:

- examines relationship-based approaches to reducing poverty;

- asks whether more diverse social networks can help reduce poverty for disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds;

- suggests policies that might promote such diversity.

This *Solutions* makes four policy recommendations:

- The receipt of Child Benefit should be conditional upon all parents eligible for the Early Years Free Entitlement when their children are between the ages of three and four (from aged two for the most disadvantaged parents) enrolling their children in quality pre-school education.

- Sure Start Children's Centres should deliver key services, such as birth registration and English language classes.

- OFSTED should take into account in their inspections of these institutions whether the social composition of governing bodies and advisory boards reflects that of local communities.

- Individual Sure Start Children's Centres should: collect standardised, socio-demographic data on participating families; and receive a financial reward for increasing the participation of disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and a financial penalty for failing to do so.

What is poverty?

Poverty is a stubborn and shameful phenomenon in modern Britain. It generates significant private and public costs. People living in the most deprived areas live seven years less than those living in the richest areas. Poverty can erode capabilities and ambition (Unwin, 2013) and cause social exclusion through isolating people from activities that are too costly (Hirsch, 2006). It can also lower both self-esteem (Batty and Flint, 2010) and quality of life (Park *et al.*, 2002).

The public costs are high; government spending on welfare provision and other interventions is substantial. The total public cost of poverty is difficult to quantify but it is estimated that child poverty alone costs an estimated £29 billion a year. Related health inequalities carry a huge cost – approximately £31 billion a year in lost productivity, £20–£32 billion a year in increased welfare costs, plus higher NHS costs (Unwin, 2013).

It is an emergent system, having many causes. As the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks (2012) argues: "People who live in deep poverty are enmeshed in complex ecosystems no one can fully see and understand". These causes can be financial (for example, low pay or lack of financial incentives to work) or cultural (for example, lack of positive role models or ambition to gain work). They can be individual (lacking educational qualifications, for instance) or environmental (a lack of jobs in the local area, for instance).

There are various definitions of what constitutes being in poverty. However, poverty has been increasingly conceived in economic terms. The commonly and internationally understood definition is the relative poverty measure: living in a household 60 per cent or below the median equivalised gross household income.

Policy-makers have also proposed and used alternative definitions, for instance, 'material deprivation'. An individual is considered materially deprived if they cannot afford pre-defined essential items or services (McKay, 2011; Kotecha *et al.,* 2013).

Seeing poverty through an economic prism has meant that policy-makers have focused on cash transfers to reduce economic hardship. During the last Labour Government (1997–2010), the amount individuals could receive through benefits and tax credits increased significantly. Admittedly, however, previous governments have pursued other approaches to minimise poverty: for example, improving parenting through schemes such as the Family Nurse Partnership and the Troubled Families Programme, introducing and increasing the minimum wage and subsidising childcare.

More recently, policy-makers have attempted to widen how poverty is understood and defined. In particular, those on the centre-right of British politics believe that the cause of poverty is more than just a lack of money. The current Secretary of State for Work and Pensions believes the following are contributory factors: family breakdown, educational failure, addiction, debt, and worklessness and economic dependency (Duncan Smith, 2010). Centre-right policy-makers have also cited low pay and loneliness as drivers of poverty (Kirkby, 2015). This Conservative Government proposes to formulate and introduce alternative measures of child poverty, such as levels of educational attainment at age 16 and the proportion of children living in workless households. It will also scrap the current relative poverty measure (DWP, 2015).

Ultimately this paper acknowledges that poverty has different definitions and dimensions. The focus is on new ways that poverty – in the different ways it is defined – might be mitigated. Specifically, this *Solutions* is interested in ideas beyond cash transfers. The increase in cash transfers in the 1990s and 2000s did reduce the number of households living in relative poverty as officially defined (Hills, 2013). However, this approach alone is insufficient in reducing poverty as understood in a broader sense. Furthermore, the ongoing fiscal squeeze means that there are limits to this approach; since 2010, the Government has sought to reduce welfare expenditure. As such, those in poverty have seen reductions in the cash transfers they receive (Belfield *et al.,* 2014).

How do strong social networks reduce poverty?

As the causes of poverty are multifaceted, the solutions for reducing it are numerous; and, individually, the solutions can only have modest impacts.

The strongest predictors of poverty are low pay, educational levels, family breakdown, and mental health issues (Milburn, 2015; CSJ, 2015). However, there is general agreement that strong social networks play some role in reducing poverty, at least for those who do not experience its most extreme forms (Finney *et al.,* 2015). As Finney *et al.* (2015) note, "Having two or more close friends is associated with lower likelihood of being in poverty".

This *Solutions* defines strong social networks as individuals having numerous and good relationships with family and friends. Strong social networks are a form of 'social capital'. The OECD describes this as "the links, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and so work together" (Brian, 2007). Strong social networks are most likely to be 'bonding social capital': relationships between people who share some common characteristic, such as socio-economic profile or ethnicity. Bonding capital "is exclusive in the sense that these networks are only open to people who share at least one important characteristic" (Gruescu and Menne, 2010).

Strong social networks are important for everyone but they are especially important for people in poverty. They have less economic capital with which to obtain things they need. Sometimes social capital can replace economic capital, enabling people to avoid or alleviate the effects of poverty. For instance, a single mother in poverty may not be able to afford the punishingly high costs of formal childcare but can leave her children with a friend. Or, family members can provide financial support that stops an individual falling into formal, and sometimes spiralling, debt. Research suggests social networks help families close to or living in poverty better cope with financial emergencies and take advantage of a wider range of opportunities – including trips for children and holidays (Shorthouse, 2014).

But it is difficult for those in poverty to maintain strong social networks. People in poverty are often time-poor. Maintaining networks can involve financial costs, for transport or activities, for example. Those in poverty also self-exclude from networks because of stigma (Matthews and Besemer, 2014).

In recent years, policy-makers have focused on ways to reduce loneliness and strengthen the social networks of those living in poverty. The Conservative Party has pushed its 'Big Society' agenda, urging family and social responsibility. Some policies encourage people to do more to help those they love and know who require support: for example, the Dementia Friends Initiative to support older people.

This *Solutions* explores new ground: it seeks to understand whether *diverse* social networks, not just strong social networks, can help reduce poverty.

How important is diversity in social networks?

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that the diversity of individuals' social networks – in regards to socio-economic and ethnic diversity – could help lessen poverty. As Finney *et al.* (2015) note, "Having a mixed ethnic friendship network, having friends from outside your neighbourhood, or having all friends who are employed reduces the risk of being poor". They conclude that: "The results imply that having mixed social network composition can reduce poverty risk so is worth policy attention".

However, it is worth noting four important findings from Finney *et al.'s* (2015) research:

- Stronger social networks (a greater number of close friends) are a more important predictor of poverty than the diversity of social networks (friends from a different ethnic group or a different neighbourhood). Moreover, both strength and diversity of social networks are less important in predicting poverty than other factors, such as educational qualifications and family separation. Finney *et al.* (2015) admit that having more diverse social networks is likely to have a limited effect on mitigating poverty. However, that effect is still significant.

- It finds only association, not necessarily causation, between poverty and lack of a diverse social network. It is important to stress, therefore, that although this *Solutions* assumes that more diverse social networks could help reduce poverty, further evidence is required to substantiate this.

- The benefit of more mixed social networks is more pronounced for less disadvantaged individuals: "It appears that the most disadvantaged gain least from having mixed social networks". However, we can still assume some positive effects for those most disadvantaged. It could also be argued that the most disadvantaged could potentially gain more from diverse networks than is currently the case.

- Ethnic minority groups are more likely to have diverse social networks than the White majority population: "Mixed ethnic networks are most common for Mixed, Black African and Black Caribbean ethnic groups". But being in poverty plays an important role here: "Those in poverty have lower levels of mixed-ethnic group friendship networks than those not in poverty for all ethnic groups, particularly for the White Irish and Indian ethnic group". This suggests that socio-economic status is a more important predictor of having more socially homogenous networks than ethnicity.

Nonetheless, it is assumed that poverty and ethnicity can interact with each other to lessen the diversity of an individual's social network. Above and beyond financial limitations caused by a person's poverty (not affording to travel somewhere), there may be cultural (language barriers) or institutional barriers (racism) that can also block people's ability to diversify their social network (McCabe *et al.,* 2013). Two different findings substantiate this:

- Different ethnic groups experience poverty at different rates – specifically those from an ethnic minority background are more likely to live in poverty than those from a White majority background (Kenway and Palmer, 2007; Craig, 2000; Platt, 2003; Flaherty *et al.,* 2004).

- The diversity of social networks varies between different ethnic groups (Finney *et al.,* 2015). In fact, having mixed social networks has differing impacts for different ethnic groups: for instance, Pakistani single parents with more mixed social networks have a 12 per cent reduced probability of being poor than their peers without mixed friendship networks; for White British single parents the same figure is 26 per cent (Finney *et al.,* 2015).

This suggests that any policies to diversify the social networks of those in poverty may have to be designed differently for different ethnic groups. The effect of diversifying social networks may also have differing impacts for people from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. With this caveat, this *Solutions* explores ways to diversify the social networks of disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds generally.

What are the benefits of diverse social networks?

The evidence suggests that disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds may benefit from social networks that are diverse in socio-economic and ethnic terms. The literature theorises that this is because disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds have access to people from a higher socio-economic background who can provide information, resources and opportunities that can improve circumstances. As Afridi (2011) explains, "the most valuable contacts are not necessarily those with whom individuals have the strongest ties. People also have networks of people from different walks of life, casual acquaintances and friends of friends. And empirical studies – particularly from the US – increasingly demonstrate that it is social networks comprising these weak bonds that have the greatest potential to deliver longer-term material gains, such as employment opportunities".

At this point, we can introduce 'bridging' social capital. In contrast to 'bonding' social capital, which was introduced previously, bridging social capital refers to relationships people have with others who do not have the same characteristics, such as socio-economic status or ethnicity. Bridging capital can be "important for the transmission of information because people from different backgrounds will have access to a wider variety of sources." (Gruescu and Menne, 2010).

Table 1 outlines the private benefits that can emerge from having more diverse social networks. These apply to everyone, including disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Broadly, benefits are either economic (enhancing financial circumstances) or non-economic (enhancing well-being). Together, these could reduce poverty in the broadest sense, or at least alleviate its effects.

Some of these benefits apply to children. For example, evidence suggests that mixed social networks in different educational settings can have positive effects on children's development, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (OECD, 2010; Lloyd and Potter, 2014). Evidence from the USA shows that children from disadvantaged ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to experience higher social mobility if they live in mixed socio-economic neighbourhoods (Chetty *et al.,* 2013). Nevertheless, there are limits to what children gain from diverse social networks: parents often lead their behaviour and decisions, especially for younger children. So adults benefit more from diverse social networks than children.

Table 1: The private benefits diverse social networks can provide to reduce poverty

Benefit	Illustration
1 Resources	Financial support, such as grants or loans
	In-kind support, such as sharing childcare
	Sharing of costs, such as on transport
2 Knowledge	How to solve problems in an efficient way
	How public services work
	Which government benefits are available
	Available jobs (the most important way people find out about jobs is through their social networks) (Ormerod, 2012)
	How best to apply for jobs
	Behaviours and norms that may enhance education and employment performance, especially for children (Ormerod, 2012)
	Improving English
3 Opportunities	Learning about new job opportunities
	Learning about life-enhancing activities, especially for children
	Finding jobs that better suit career preferences and educational qualifications (Franzen and Hangartner, 2006)
4 Solving collective action problems	Networks, especially including those with more resources and power, can "create strength in numbers and enable collective action or voluntary effort (improving a local area, for example, or social campaigning, or ensuring a voice in local affairs)" (Afridi, 2011)
5 Health and psychological support	Friendship and emotional support
	Signposting to the most effective support
	Access to better health services
	Knowledge of healthy practices
	Improved health and reduced anxiety (Social Integration Commission, 2014)

Examples of the benefits of knowledge and opportunities from mixed social networks include:

- a Chinese woman whose landlady (a hospital consultant) helped explain how to deal with public officials (McCabe *et al.,* 2013);

- a Polish migrant who learned English after sharing a house with a group of Australians, allowing her to find a job in the medical profession (Ryan *et al.,* 2008);

- diverse social networks providing essential motivation and contacts for those starting a new business (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986).

There are also public benefits where both adults and children enjoy more diverse social networks. Again, these can broadly be identified as economic and non-economic benefits (see Table 2).

Table 2: The public benefits diverse social networks can bring

Benefit type	Illustration
Public economic benefits	Improved economic growth (Beugelsdijk and Smulders, 2003)
	Diverse social networks can be important in "fast-growing new industries" (Matthews and Besemer, 2014)
	Wider talent pool from which businesses can recruit
Public non-economic benefits	Higher levels of trust, particularly in a multi-ethnic society (Janmaat, 2014; Caluwaerts and Deschower, 2014)
	Lower levels of criminal offending and the associated costs (Sampson and Groves, 1989)
	Reduced public expenditure as a result of improved health
	Improved education and skill levels
	A more socio-economically diverse population interacting can make people more committed to reducing poverty (Bailey *et al.,* 2013)
	More diverse networks can avoid group polarisation in thinking (Sunstein, 2002)
	Diverse social networks allow communities to revitalise in the wake of catastrophic events (Hawkins and Maurer, 2010)

Some evidence quantifies the societal costs of not having sufficient mixed social networks. The Social Integration Commission, for instance, has estimated this 'lack of integration' costs the UK economy roughly £6 billion, or 0.5 per cent of GDP, each year (Social Integration Commission, 2014).

The limitations of diversifying social networks

While this paper recognises that social networks are usually beneficial "through connections into influential, predominantly white, mainstream society" (McCabe *et al.,* 2013), policy should not aim only to get disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds to mix with white middle-class men and women. As Finney *et al* (2015) found, "the probability of being poor and of being very poor is less for individuals with (ethnically) mixed friendship networks than for those without mixed friendship networks", regardless of ethnicity.

As already acknowledged, poverty has different causes and several are significantly more predictive of poverty than the quality of individuals' social networks, never mind their diversity. There are other limitations to mitigating poverty through more diverse social networks:

- The most impoverished gain the least (Finney *et al.,* 2015). What we might achieve in reducing poverty may therefore be quite limited.

- There is an argument that eroding the importance of social networks for life outcomes will have a bigger effect. Social networks are, by nature, exclusionary, with the poorest excluded the most. Accordingly, resources, knowledge and opportunities should be distributed through more egalitarian and formal institutions.

Despite these considerations, there is a case for seeking to diversify the social networks of disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds. The evidence suggests there is a statistically significant, albeit limited, relationship between poverty for disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds and the diversity of their social networks.

The role of institutions in diversifying social networks

Social networks can be strengthened and diversified through institutions. Institutions are sites of human activity: they are where people's relationships are formed and formalised (for a rich debate on the definition of an institution, see Hodgson, 2006). The Internet is another, growing, way of developing social networks, but falls outside the reach of this *Solutions*.

Broadly, there are private institutions (such as the family or a faith group) or public institutions (such as government hospitals and schools). However, this distinction is often blurred: universities or private nurseries, for example, are officially private institutions, legally autonomous from government, but they do receive extensive funding from government and have to adhere to certain government rules.

Social networks can be strengthened and diversified through a variety of public and private institutions. This paper focuses on public institutions, for two main reasons. First, public institutions are more likely to be accessible to a wider range of people. Families tend to only enable people who are related to participate in them. Religious organisations tend to include only people with the same faith. Furthermore, public institutions can be compulsory, such as schooling. If nearly everyone is entitled to a service and is sometimes made to take advantage of that service, one should expect greater diversity of participation than in settings that allow people to self-select in or out of that service. In essence, public institutions have the greatest ability to enable bridging capital, where people from a range of backgrounds can mix socially. The second reason is that it is easier for policy-makers to drive change in public institutions than private institutions to achieve the goal of increased diversity in social networks.

The role of nurseries, Children's Centres and state primary schools

This *Solutions* focuses on three specific institutions – nurseries, Sure Start Children's Centres and state primary schools (see Box 1). This is not only because they are public institutions that offer a universal service, and in the case of primary schooling, a compulsory service. They are unique to other institutions in two other ways.

- They are public institutions in which both children and parents are likely to attend. Since children under the age of 11 often need accompanying, it makes sense that their parents are more likely to visit these particular institutions than institutions that older children attend such as secondary school. Various studies have shown that parental involvement in their child's education – including parent-teacher contact and participation in school activities – diminishes as children get older (Izzo *et al.,* 1999). The institutions selected therefore make it possible to diversify the social networks of a greater number of both adults and children, enabling us to maximise the private and public benefits from diverse social networks outlined earlier in Tables 1 and 2.

- Second, they are public institutions where there is solid evidence to suggest that children's participation yields significant benefits. The EPPSE study, for instance, shows that children who participate in high-quality formal childcare are likely to have higher educational attainment in the long-term, right until the age of 17 (IOE, 2014). Participation in childcare also enables parental employment, which can boost living standards. This paper focuses on nurseries, rather than other forms of formal childcare such as childminders. This is because nurseries, on average, are deemed to be higher in quality (OFSTED, 2015). Further, nurseries are institutions that simply have a greater number of people involved and thus provide a greater probability for the development of diverse social networks.

The evidence around the benefits to children from high-quality nursery participation is strong. But the evidence for the benefits of children's participation in Sure Start Children's Centres is ambiguous. The ongoing National Evaluation of Sure Start suggested that, by age three, children in Sure Start areas were exhibiting better social outcomes than children not in Sure Start areas (NESS, 2008). But, by age seven, Sure Start had been found to have no significant impact on child outcomes. However, the later analysis does show improvements in parenting behaviour and the well-being of parents. This may have long-term benefits to children's development. Indeed, it is important to note that researchers believe that the benefits to children from such interventions "typically do not emerge until at least fifteen

years after the intervention begins" (Meadows, 2011). As the former director of Sure Start, Naomi Eisenstadt (2012), has stated, "it may just be too early to tell".

Importantly, what is unique to Children's Centres, compared to nurseries and state primary schools, is that there are some services offered by this institution that directly involve and benefit parents, as outlined in Box 1 below.

The benefit to children of participation in primary school is understood to be improved educational attainment, hence why it is compulsory to attend.

The focus on these three particular institutions also relates to the fact that this is a short paper, and can focus only on a limited number of institutions.

Box 1: What are Sure Start Children's Centres, nurseries and state primary schools?

Nurseries

Nurseries typically offer childcare for children aged four or below. Ninety-one per cent of nurseries are in the private, voluntary and independent sector (Whittaker, 2015). The rest are maintained nurseries. For this *Solutions*, nurseries are considered public institutions, although most could also be defined as private institutions.

Most parents must pay to send their child to nursery. The cost has been rising above inflation nearly every year for almost a decade; 55 per cent of parents with children under five report that high costs are the biggest problem with childcare in their area (Shorthouse *et al.*, 2012).

There are various forms of financial support for attending nursery. The Early Years Free Entitlement enables all three- and four-year-olds, and the 40 per cent most deprived two-year-olds, to attend any formal childcare setting – including nursery – for free for 15 hours per week. The Government is currently seeking to extend this to 30 hours per week, for working parents only. This money is paid to nurseries via local government.

From Autumn 2015, working parents not in receipt of Universal Credit can access Tax Free Childcare. This will enable parents whose annual salary is £150,000 or below to get 20 per cent of their annual childcare costs up to £10,000 paid for by government. For parents on Universal Credit (the new system that merges six benefits into one), a majority will be able to get 85 per cent of their weekly childcare costs paid for by government.

Sure Start Children's Centres

Sure Start started in the late 1990s. It sought to promote the physical, intellectual, emotional and social development of children from birth to aged five. Sure Start was originally based on the successful Head Start programme in the USA (Ludwig and Phillips, 2008). The programme is now delivered through over 3,000 Children's Centres (Houses of Commons Debate, 2013). Initially, Sure Start was focused on the most disadvantaged areas. But it is now a universal service found in different communities across the country. Children's Centres are encouraged to offer both universal and targeted services.

Sure Start offers different activities depending on the local Children's Centre. However, statutory guidance defines certain services that must be offered: act as a hub for the local community; share their expertise with other early learning settings; use evidence-based approaches to deliver targeted, family-centred support; and provide high-quality care (DfE, 2013). It is no longer mandatory for Children's Centres to provide childcare. Typical services include outreach and family support services, healthcare and advice (including antenatal care), play and learning opportunities, support for parents and children with special needs, links with JobCentre Plus for employment and training opportunities, and childcare (NAO, 2009).

Central government funds Sure Start Children's Centres through local councils. It is estimated that 15 per cent of Children's Centres are delivered by voluntary organisations, such as 4Children and The Children's Society. The overwhelming majority are run by local councils or schools (4Children, 2014). Parents do not pay for their children to access Sure Start Children's Centres, although some charge for some activities.

State primary schools

Primary schools are compulsory for children aged four or five to eleven. State primary schools are funded directly by government, either as maintained schools (funded via local government) or academies (funded via central government). Parents do not pay for schooling but may be charged for trips, uniforms, PE kits, stationery and swimming lessons. These costs accumulate to an average parental expenditure of £563 per primary school pupil a year (Brunwin *et al.,* 2004).

Participation in nurseries, Children's Centres and primary schools

Every child must attend primary school so attendance is 100 per cent (World Bank, 2015). The latest figures show that 79 per cent of three-year-olds are in formal childcare, predominantly nurseries. This drops substantially for those aged two or below, with only 37 per cent in some form of formal childcare (Huskinson, 2014).

Data on Sure Start Children's Centres is harder to obtain (NAO, 2009). It is estimated that 1.05 million families use Children's Centres on a regular basis (4Children, 2014), a significant number but fewer than nurseries or primary schools.

In theory, adult participation in these institutions is also likely to yield benefits, since they help cultivate more diverse social networks. Certain activities at Sure Start Children's Centres – such as parenting courses or employment services – provide direct benefits to adults.

Participation for parents in the other institutions – nurseries and state primary schools – is different to children. Children are the intended beneficiaries of these public services: their participation derives from their attendance. But, for adults, participation could mean a variety of activities (See Box 2).

Box 2: How adults participate in nurseries, Sure Start Children's Centres and state primary schools

- **Light:** Drop child off.
- **Medium:** Attend and/or volunteer at regular events, like sports days.
- **Heavy:** Involved in governance, such as the Parent Teacher Association or governing body.
- **Direct:** Participate in services directly provided for parents (unique to Children's Centres).

Of course, there is only so much policy-makers can – and should – do in supporting people to develop relationships; this depends on the actions of individuals. But it is a reasonable assumption that bringing people from different backgrounds together provides them with a greater opportunity to diversify their social networks. Certainly, evidence suggests this, even for light participation: "Passive interaction, at schools, libraries, community centres and parks is an effective way of developing social networks among diverse people, including different ethnic groups" (Matthews and Besemer, 2014). But it is assumed when adults engage in heavier forms of participation, it is more likely they will develop more diverse social networks.

Because children are engaged in direct participation in all of the institutions focused on, it is assumed they are in a strong position to develop diverse networks. Nevertheless, as argued previously, adults can obtain more benefits from diverse social networks than children.

Finally, it is worth noting that women are more likely than men to engage in the activities in Box 2. In this sense, women are at the forefront of increasing social capital to mitigate their family's poverty.

Participation rates of disadvantaged children from ethnic minority backgrounds

While attending primary school is compulsory, children's participation in nursery schools and Sure Start Children's Centres varies along both ethnic and socio-economic lines.

Nurseries
Use of formal childcare, including nurseries, is significantly lower among ethnic minority groups than for the White majority population (see Figure 1).
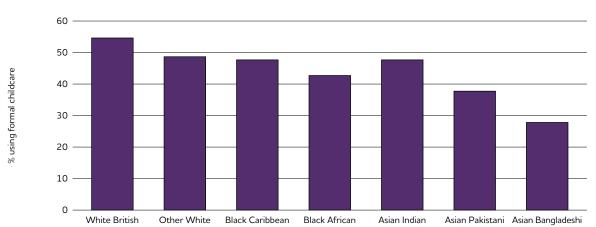
Figure 1: Usage of formal childcare, according to ethnicity (Huskinson, 2014)

Figure 1 is indicative: it focuses on all formal childcare settings – not just nurseries – and for children up to 14. However, other research supports the assertion that children from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to attend nursery (Khan *et al.,* 2014). Specifically, Pakistani and Black African children are commonly cited as having relatively low levels of engagement with nurseries. There is encouraging data that this 'ethnic gap' might be closing somewhat: the latest data, for instance, shows no significant variation on ethnic lines in the take-up of the Early Years Free Entitlement for three- and four-year-olds (Huskinson, 2014).

There is also a strong correlation between a family's socio-economic status and participation in formal childcare: 68 per cent of children from families with incomes above £45,000 a year have participated in formal childcare compared with 41 per cent of those from families with incomes of £10,000 or less a year. Even looking at the Early Years Free Entitlement for three- and four-year-olds shows those from families on the highest incomes are more likely to participate (Huskinson, 2014).

This all implies that socio-economic status is a more important determinant than ethnicity in shaping participation rates in nurseries, but both are still important, hence why we will focus later on boosting participation rates among disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Sure Start Children's Centres
Data collection in Children's Centres is patchy and not standardised. However, evidence published before 2010 showed that Children's Centres found it harder to engage families from the most deprived backgrounds (NAO, 2006; OFSTED 2008). Interestingly, other OFSTED analysis has found that White disadvantaged groups are often the most difficult to engage in local Children's Centres (OFSTED, 2009). Evidence submitted to the House of Commons Education Select Committee illustrates that reaching disadvantaged groups is an ongoing problem (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013a). It seems a fair assumption therefore that the participation rates of disadvantaged children from ethnic minority backgrounds could improve.

Participation rates of disadvantaged parents from ethnic minority backgrounds
Nurseries
It is hard to quantify the level of participation of parents in nursery schools because of data limitations. The evidence that does exist suggests parents do regularly participate, at least in dropping their child off and speaking to childcare staff. A recent survey found that 84 per cent of parents speak to staff at least once or twice a week. Thinking about heavier forms of participation, a majority of parents in nurseries report that they attend parents' evenings and meetings (Huskinson, 2014). None of this data, however, is broken down by the socio-economic profile or ethnicity of parents. Since it has already been demonstrated that disadvantaged children from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to participate in nurseries, it can be assumed that parents from these backgrounds are also less likely to participate generally in nurseries.

Sure Start Children's Centres
It has been indicated that the direct participation of disadvantaged parents from ethnic minority backgrounds in Sure Start Children's Centres is low. But there are other forms of participation. Other evidence points to the fact that disadvantaged parents from ethnic minority backgrounds also do not participate as much as other parents in these forms of activities – for example, in decision-making over Sure Start services (Williams and Churchill, 2006).

State primary schools
Evidence suggests that disadvantaged parents from ethnic minority backgrounds do participate in school activities, for example, as helpers in school activities (Page *et al.*, 2007).

But parents from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to participate in formal groups connected with the school, such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) (Bagnall *et al.*, 2003). School governing bodies tend to be disproportionately represented by professional people (James *et al.*, 2014). Less formally, research in Scotland has indicated that middle-class parents are more likely to be involved in activities at their child's school than working-class parents (38 per cent compared with 31 per cent) (Wallace, 2009). Similarly, parents with higher socio-economic status are more likely to be involved in the parent council, the PTA, and library and dinner duties (Peters *et al.*, 2008).

Equally, a recent survey of school governors (both primary and secondary) shows that 96 per cent are White compared with approximately 84 per cent of the population (James *et al.*, 2014). This is the same both in advantaged and disadvantaged catchment areas.

However, the evidence suggests that socio-economic status is more important than ethnicity in determining the rate and level of participation of parents in schools. Research from the USA shows that while low-income parents have lower participation rates than higher-income parents, Black low-income parents "visit schools more frequently and participate in parent-teacher associations at a higher rate than low-income whites" (Diamond, 1999). In addition, a recent UK study found that 43 per cent of Black parents are involved in the PTA compared with 29 per cent of White parents (Peters *et al.*, 2008).

What are the barriers to people participating?

There are different barriers to participation in the particular public service institutions identified (see Table 3). Many will apply to some disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds but not to others. It is not possible to quantify how important each factor is for different people. As researchers have noted: "Black, Minority and Ethnic (BME) communities should not be viewed as a homogeneous whole. The diversity both within and between ethnic and cultural groups should not be overlooked" (Lloyd and Rafferty, 2006).

The barriers are those experienced by adults. Children's participation is almost always determined by whether their parents enable them to attend.

Table 3: Different barriers to participation in nurseries, Sure Start Children's Centres and primary schools

Barrier	Description
Economic	The direct cost, or opportunity costs, of using these public services.
Cultural	The cultural assumptions that make it less likely that such public services are perceived as relevant.
Attitudinal	A lack of confidence or particular attitudes that makes individuals less likely to participate in such public services.
Informational	A lack of knowledge of the services available and citizens' entitlements.
Skills-based	An inability to do what is required to participate in them, for example, English language competency.
Institutional	Racism, a lack of staff diversity and poor cultural sensitivity among staff, which fails to make services welcoming.

Economic barriers

Economic barriers relate to parents' poverty rather than their ethnicity. Childcare poses the largest economic barrier. Sure Start Children's Centres and state primary schools are free (although a minority of Children's Centres require payment for some services, 4Children, 2013). This is not the case for most nurseries. The cost of childcare has been rising above inflation for almost a decade (Rutter, 2015). Many parents get relatively generous support from government to help pay for childcare costs (see Box 2). Yet, recent analysis by the Department for Education shows that about 10 per cent of mothers looking after their children full-time at home are doing so because of the high cost of childcare (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Across all ethnic groups, parents commonly cite high costs as a reason for not taking up formal childcare, including nurseries (Barnard, 2014).

Certain ethnic minority groups are more likely to face unemployment or a lack of economic activity. This is associated in part with their local labour markets. Generally, those from ethnic minority backgrounds are disadvantaged in the labour market. Those from White Gypsy, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean backgrounds all face an increased likelihood of unemployment (Catney and Sabater, 2015). But, even in the same labour market area, different ethnic minority groups experience different levels of employment. This makes certain ethnic minority groups less likely to need nursery provision.

Transport and opportunity costs associated with regularly visiting these institutions may make those facing poverty less able to participate regularly, even lightly but especially heavily. Often, adults participating in these institutions, especially in governance, need flexible working hours; those on lower incomes are less likely to be granted flexible working. For instance, more affluent workers are more than twice as likely to have been allowed to work at home as those on lower incomes (37 per cent compared with 18 per cent) (YouGov, 2012).

Cultural barriers

Within some ethnic groups, there is a strong cultural norm for women to care for young children at home. This is especially true for Pakistani and Black African families (Khan *et al.*, 2014). These groups are less likely to engage with nurseries and, to some extent, Sure Start Children's Centres.

In addition, in some ethnic minority groups, "parents are not expected to take an active interest in child education or educational services" (Katz *et al.*, 2007). Less educated parents – who are more likely to be living in poverty – are also less likely to feel involved in their children's education (DCSF, 2008). This may explain lower forms of participation across all of these institutions.

Attitudinal barriers

A lack of confidence and low self-esteem, especially among younger parents from a lower socio-economic group, may make some adults less likely to participate. Research suggests that some groups can feel intimidated by more affluent and articulate parents, especially in Sure Start Children's Centres. There is evidence that some ethnic minority parents are fearful of being judged in nurseries (Williams and Churchill, 2006).

Some disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds are sceptical of government services. Members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, for instance, can be suspicious of authorities and public services (DCSF, 2010). Among White, working-class families, there is some scepticism towards professional, formal childcare (Brown and Dench, 2004).

Informational barriers

Families' awareness of Sure Start Children's Centres and nurseries – and of any related financial support – is generally high. But just over a fifth of parents report that they are not aware of their local Children's Centres (Thornton and Dalziel, 2009). A significant minority of parents feel they do not have adequate information about formal childcare, including nurseries, in their local area. Those on the lowest incomes are more likely to report such dissatisfaction with the level of information they receive on formal childcare in their area (Huskinson, 2014). Other qualitative work suggests that particular ethnic groups, such as Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black African families, have low levels of knowledge about childcare services and entitlements (Khan *et al.*, 2014).

A lack of information could therefore be preventing light participation in both nurseries and Sure Start Children's Centres.

Skills-based barriers

For some ethnic groups, competency in speaking English is a critical factor preventing anything more than light participation. Parents have cited language difficulties as one of the main reasons they felt unable to help their children access important educational services (Page *et al.*, 2007). Other research shows that some ethnic minority parents receive information about childcare but are unable to understand it (Bell *et al.*, 2005).

It has also been argued that some parents facing disadvantage frequently lack, or believe they lack, the skills to negotiate the complexities of public service institutions, for example, understanding different information (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Institutional barriers

Various studies indicate that levels of racism in Britain have declined dramatically in recent decades (Katwala, 2014). However, prejudice still exists, often in more subtle forms such as low expectations of particular people, including from staff in public services institutions (Matthews and Bessemer, 2014). Researchers have found evidence of staff in Sure Start stereotyping ethnic minority parents and holding judgemental views. For instance, some believed that minority parents had lower capacities, and they frequently blamed the parents for not accessing all the services available to them (Williams and Churchill, 2006).

Moreover, researchers have witnessed nursery staff with "ambivalent attitudes to race, which influenced their treatment of black and minority ethnic children and their parents" (Box *et al.,* 2001). Clearly, this can affect the inclusiveness and openness of these institutions.

The ethnicity of staff can also affect how disadvantaged ethnic minority groups participate. The literature argues that more diverse staffing would aid participation by ethnic minority groups in Sure Start Children's Centres (Anning *et al.,* 2005). In nurseries, Sure Start Children's Centres and primary schools, staff are more likely to be White and not directly representative of the communities they serve. This is true for the socio-economic profile of staff too. Often, this means institutional norms may reflect 'middle-class' values, unintentionally excluding people from disadvantaged ethnic minority groups (Katz *et al.,* 2007; Hastings and Matthews, 2011).

Cultural sensitivity and appropriateness is also worth noting. The use of both verbal and written English could exclude some disadvantaged ethnic minority groups. In many Sure Start Children's Centres, training on culture and race was either non-existent or inadequate (Lloyd and Rafferty, 2006).

What are the barriers for creating socially mixed institutions?

Even if the above barriers were removed and more disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds participated in them, it may be the case that the institutions may not have good socio-economic or ethnic diversity in terms of the children and adults attending. This would undermine the goal of harnessing the potential of these institutions to diversify social networks.

These institutions operate in specific areas. Parents are only willing to travel so far; this is especially true of parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who can spend less on transport. Therefore, the type of people these institutions can attract is heavily dependent on the socio-demographic profile of the local community they serve.

Analysis of Sure Start shows the social mix of participating families improving over time. However, catchment areas make it difficult for UK schools to secure substantial socio-demographic mix in their intake (Burgess and Wilson, 2005). More affluent parents can buy houses near more sought-after schools, which leads to greater segregation (Allen *et al.,* 2010).

This *Solutions* does not suggest changes to school admission policies, but it is certainly worth policy-makers considering fairer admission policies, such as ballots, to encourage greater heterogeneity in school populations (Sutton Trust, 2007).

Policies to encourage more diverse social networks

Essentially, greater diversity in nurseries, Sure Start Children's Centres and state primary schools requires:

- removing or lessening those barriers that disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds face when trying to participate;

- ensuring these institutions attract a wider group of adults and children from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

Achieving this would increase the likelihood of disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds diversifying their social networks.

It is not envisaged that the policies proposed will suddenly transform the participation rates of disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds, or the diversity of people attending particular institutions. Achieving these two aims will take time and a combination of interventions. Rather, it is assumed that the policies proposed will be among many that will contribute to the achievement of these two aims.

Nor is it assumed that professional policy-makers have all the answers. There is a rising chorus of criticism against what has been dubbed 'the policy presumption': that policies devised and implemented from Westminster are the best ways of achieving social change (Hilton, 2015). As Matthew Taylor, the Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Arts, has noted, "Interest groups of all kinds, from trade associations to think tanks and charities, often display the presumption that all problems can be solved by traditional policy. It is, after all, much easier to write a pamphlet calling for a new Whitehall funding pot or a change of law than engaging in the messy and difficult process of building local or national alliances of organisations willing to tackle action themselves" (Taylor, 2014).

With this in mind, this report recognises that the people working for these institutions or living in the communities they serve are often best placed to devise solutions. Indeed, across the country, such innovation is already happening. For example:

- The Yemeni Community Association, in Sheffield, has established Fir Vale pre-school to meet the needs of the Yemeni community (YCA, 2015). Staff can speak Arabic, Punjabi and Urdu (Sheffield Directory, 2015). The association also offers other services within the nursery. These include adult learning sessions in sewing and English as a second language.

- A parent champion campaign, also in Sheffield, aims to raise awareness amongst minority groups of available services, such as the Early Years Free Entitlement. The campaign enlisted parents from Roma and Yemeni families. These parent champions reached at least 1,000 families over a six-month period (Family and Childcare Trust, 2015).

- The Bi-Lingual Advocacy Service provides general advocacy and support to Sure Start parents who are refugees or asylum seekers (Gordon, 2005).

In fairness, central government has introduced policies that try to boost participation rates. For example, the Coalition Government expanded the health visiting service, with the aim of using these trusted professionals to reach out to certain social groups and encourage them to attend Sure Start Children's Centres. The recommendations here are intended to make a positive difference alongside the policies and interventions already being implemented.

Findings from behavioural science show that often individuals are more likely to change their behaviour by copying those in their social network. So, even if the policies proposed incentivise different individual levels of participation, this in turn may well trigger others in those individuals' social networks to follow suit. As the economist Paul Ormerod has noted: "Networks can operate with incentives, to reinforce and magnify the initial impact of the latter" (Ormerod, 2012). The likelihood and scale of this impact, however, is uncertain.

The policies proposed will not address all of the barriers for the different institutions. The purpose is to propose a handful of policies that might reduce some of the most significant and prevalent barriers faced by disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Recommendation 1: Child Benefit should be conditional upon children attending quality pre-school education

The Government currently funds the Early Years Free Entitlement, covering 15 hours a week of free formal childcare (including nursery) for all three- and four-year-olds and the most disadvantaged two-year-olds. In this parliament, it intends to extend this to 30 hours a week of free formal childcare for all three- and four-year-olds if all parents in the household are working. This Free Entitlement ought to be viewed primarily as an education rather than a childcare service. Indeed, previous qualitative research shows that framing childcare as part of the education system can improve uptake among Pakistani families (Khan *et al.*, 2014).

Families from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to use the Early Years Free Entitlement. This is undesirable given the clear private and public benefits from participation in pre-school education. Most importantly, it can boost educational development for children from poorer backgrounds in particular. But non-attendance by children, particularly at nurseries, means both they and their parents are less likely to develop relationships with others.

As shown, there are many – and different – reasons for lower participation by disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Some of these reasons are more applicable to certain groups and individuals than others. Certain cultural and attitudinal barriers could be overcome by insisting on 100 per cent attendance in pre-school education from the age of two for more disadvantaged groups, specifically through the uptake of the Early Years Free Entitlement. Even if parents are looking after children full-time at home, they should be expected to take their child to pre-school education for 15 hours a week once their child reaches two.

All disadvantaged parents from ethnic minority backgrounds will receive Child Benefit. Government should find a way of making the receipt of Child Benefit for all parents eligible for the Early Years Free Entitlement for their children between the ages of three and four (from two for the 40 per cent most disadvantaged parents) conditional upon proven enrolment of their child in quality pre-school education, whatever form of quality formal childcare is used. The definition of 'quality' will have to be carefully considered to ensure such provision is available to all parents: a possible criterion could be a satisfactory OFSTED inspection.

Recommendation 2: Sure Start Children's Centres should deliver key services, such as birth registration and English language classes

The location of vital or mandatory services in Sure Start Children's Centres could help get more families through the door. For example, in some local authorities – such as Manchester, Bury and York – parents can register births at Children's Centres. Some evidence suggests that the participation rates of different families are higher in these Children's Centres (All Party Parliamentary Sure Start Group, 2013).

Making such services more widely available in Sure Start Children's Centres could help mitigate the attitudinal and informational barriers that exist for some parents accessing them.

There are also skills-based barriers to participation, specifically, poor English language. This may make adults nervous about engaging in the institutions or unable to understand the services on offer.

Currently, immigrants must demonstrate that they speak or are learning to speak English to receive some out-of-work benefits. Bright Blue recently suggested government stipulate that, to receive any form of benefits, immigrants must demonstrate they can speak English by having, or being enrolled on a course for, an approved qualification (Shorthouse and Kirkby, 2015).

Sure Start Children's Centres could be the institution where approved English Language courses are delivered, especially if attendance on these courses is increasingly mandatory for a significant proportion of immigrants, who form a significant proportion of disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The recommendation is to update statutory guidance so all local authorities encourage Sure Start Children's Centres to:

- provide birth registration;

- be the location of approved English language courses.

Recommendation 3: OFSTED should assess the social composition of the governing bodies of primary schools and nursery schools and of advisory boards of Sure Start Children's Centres

It is a legal requirement for primary schools and maintained nursery schools to have a governing body. Many nurseries are private, voluntary or independent institutions, and so governed by a Board of Directors or Trustees. Local authorities are legally required to ensure Sure Start Children's Centres have an Advisory Board providing strategic oversight and advice. At the very least, local Children's Centres can share an Advisory Board.

The only condition on the composition of the governing bodies of maintained schools (including nursery and primary schools) is that they have at least seven posts: the headteacher, two parent governors, one staff governor, one local authority governor, and foundation or partnership governors as appropriate. Academy schools enjoy greater freedoms, with only three roles prescribed: the headteacher and two parent governors (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013b).

The only condition on the composition of Sure Start Children's Centre Advisory Boards is that they include representatives from each Children's Centre, the local authority, and parents and prospective parents in the local authority area (DfE, 2010). Government statutory guidance recommends that Boards have two to three parents, with efforts made to include parents from disadvantaged backgrounds as members (DfE, 2010).

These institutions need stronger incentives to think creatively and do more to ensure disadvantaged parents from ethnic minority backgrounds participate as members of governing bodies or Advisory Boards. Such participation may also enable institutions to draw upon these parents' knowledge and connections to increase participation more generally within the wider community.

The recommendation is that OFSTED:

- takes into account the socio-demographic composition of a school's or nursery school's governing body, or a Sure Start Children's Centre Advisory Board, when inspecting these institutions;

- grants 'Outstanding' status only to those whose governing body or Advisory Board generally reflects the socio-demographic characteristics of the families attending or living in the local area.

Recommendation 4: Sure Start Children's Centre should: collect standardised, socio-demographic data on participating families; and receive a financial reward where they increase participation of disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds

Currently, nursery schools and primary schools must complete statutory school censuses. These collect information about pupils, including their ethnicity and eligibility for free school meals. Censuses take place in the spring, summer and autumn terms, and are submitted to the local authority, then to the Department for Education. Researchers can analyse this data through the National Pupil Database.

No such comprehensive and standardised data analysis and collection occurs in Sure Start Children's Centres. The recommendation is that:

- local authorities have a legal responsibility to ensure Sure Start Children's Centres collect standardised data on the families using their services, such as ethnicity and the claiming of benefits. This will enable policy-makers and politicians to review and reward performance, based on reaching parents from disadvantaged backgrounds;

- Children's Centres that increase participation rates of disadvantaged ethnic minority groups to a certain level be rewarded with a supplement in their local authority funding for the following year. Centres that do not achieve this should see some reduction in their local authority funding for the following year.

These steps could help overcome some of the institutional barriers that prevent effective engagement with disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Conclusion

These four policy recommendations seek to reduce some of the barriers disadvantaged children and adults from ethnic minority backgrounds may encounter to participation in nurseries, Sure Start Children's Centres or primary schools. The other primary aim is to encourage a greater socio-demographic mix of children and adults participating in these institutions.

Policy can only help to a certain extent. The formation of relationships depends on individuals. But, if more disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds participate – and more participate more heavily – as a result of these policy suggestions and other innovative interventions, there is greater opportunity for building more diverse social networks.

More diverse social networks could help mitigate poverty for this group, to a limited but significant extent. But participation in quality nurseries and primary schools is also associated with improved educational attainment for children, and participation in Sure Start Children's Centres with improved parenting. In essence, increased participation in these institutions from disadvantaged ethnic minority groups is not only helpful in reducing poverty because they are places where more diverse social networks can flourish, but because of the improvements they can yield to child development and parenting.

We remain in straitened fiscal times. Lessening poverty through cash transfers can only get us so far in mitigating poverty. The Government might find that policies to strengthen and, in particular, diversify people's relationships, especially for disadvantaged people from ethnic minority backgrounds, could play a role in the urgent and necessary task of reducing poverty.

About this paper

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