

Did the Pathfinder Programme change people's lives?



Significant effort has gone into improving the lives of people living in deprived areas. Did this work? And have impacts persisted?

When a local authority intervenes to make the lives of people living in deprived areas better, there are significant challenges to knowing if the policy worked.

There is also the potential that lives might be improved in unanticipated ways. One study set out to see if using panel survey data might provide better answers than the evaluations that came before.

Why was this policy evaluation considered necessary?

Over a period of twenty years, successive governments sought to improve the outcomes for more deprived local areas by supporting the relevant local authorities to deliver area-based initiatives. These have included:

- New Labour's 1998 National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal.
- The Coalition Government's Big Society and the 2011 Localism Bill.
- The levelling-up agenda as introduced in the 2019 Conservative Party manifesto.

A 2013 National Audit Office report pointed to particular weaknesses with the existing evaluations of spatial policy interventions, with an accompanying independent review concluding that none of the evaluations of spatial policy provided convincing evidence of policy impacts. In concluding this, the review identified bespoke interviews with those responsible for delivery as particularly prone to bias and exaggeration of any potential positive effects of the intervention.

What was evaluated?

The Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders Programme of the early 2000s was a flagship Labour government £100 million initiative aimed at enabling 35 deprived communities to improve local outcomes. The programme aimed to improve and join up local services (such as the police, environmental services and local health care providers), making them more responsive to local needs. A previous evaluation considered only a narrow range of benefits, applying only to those residents living in Pathfinders areas. A group of researchers set out to illustrate the potential benefits of using the predecessor to Understanding Society – the British Panel Household Survey (BHPS) – to evaluate such evaluations. They used the Pathfinders Programme to illustrate the case.

⌋ whilst the programme might have helped with overall improvements ... housing conditions remained relatively poor ⌋

How was the evaluation carried out?

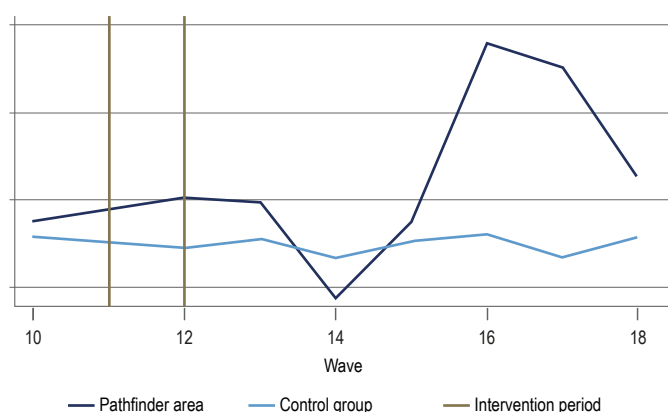
This evaluation used a difference-in-difference approach to compare changes in outcomes of those in the Pathfinder Areas with 'matched' control individuals not impacted by the intervention, whilst also controlling for potential confounding factors. The strength of this approach is that it controls for underlying trends in the lives of similar people, irrespective of the initiatives. A specific approach within this was to 'match' each BHPS participant living inside the Pathfinder areas with a BHPS participant control from outside intervention area; selected based the 'propensity' that their circumstances would merit them to live in an intervention area. This combination of methods sought to overcome the bias that Pathfinder areas were not chosen by random allocation.

The approach also considered the long-term and spillover effects that extend outside of the targeted areas – capturing those living 800m and 1,000m from a Pathfinder area – as well as testing how long any benefits might have persisted.

Findings

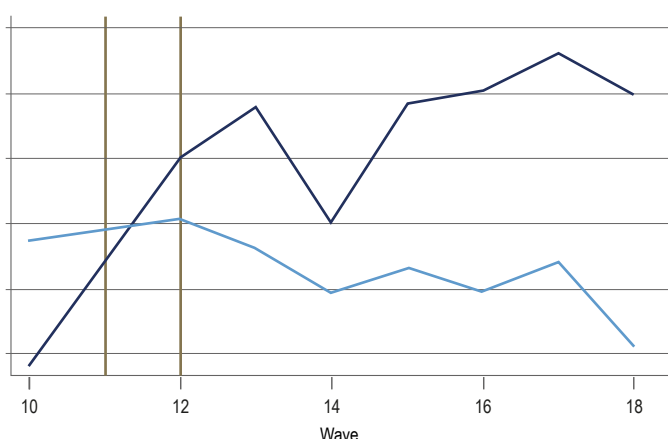
The Pathfinders programme initially had a positive effect on many of the targeted neighbourhood and housing problems measured. These including *reported noise from the street and the neighbours, pollution, house condensation and damp walls, and to a lesser extent crime and vandalism*. The estimated level of effects for these was found to be between 10 and 40 percentage points. However, most of these positive effects were found to be short-lived and not observed beyond 4 years. And in fact, *noise from the street and the neighbours, condensation, and damp walls* outcomes were found to be significantly higher five to six years after the programme. The impact on health outcomes were also found to be limited.

Example trends: Noise from neighbours



A positive outcome not explicitly targeted by the programme was an increase *frequency of talking with neighbours*, which was seen to persist into the longer term.

Unexpected trends for: Frequency of talking to neighbours



Overall, the evaluation concluded that, whilst the programme might have helped with overall improvements related to cleaner houses and streets, housing conditions remained relatively poor. The evaluation suggested that there was insufficient programme investment to make sustainable changes.



What were the strengths of using Understanding Society data?

A notable strength of using Understanding Society's predecessor survey, BHPS, was the objectivity provided by the respondents not knowing that their responses were going to be used in the evaluation of the Pathfinder Programme. Further benefits included:

- The geographical identifier data available for each BHPS household via its 'Secure Lab' made the identification of intervention and control groups possible whilst not risking the identity of those who responded to the survey.
- The longitudinal nature of BHPS allowed the evaluation to confirm that the lives of Pathfinder and non-Pathfinder respondents followed similar trends before the Pathfinder Programme started.
- The longitudinal nature of the BHPS also permitted the evaluation to report how persistent the impacts were.
- The wide nature of the BHPS questions permitted the evaluation to identify outcomes not anticipated by the programme and were therefore missed from previous evaluations of the programme.

What do these findings mean?

Area based interventions are not made in isolation, and the areas are not selected for intervention at random. They require the involved commitment from those on the ground to work to change the lives of communities of people who need change. This means that measuring successes by only referencing trends and interviewing with those concerned risks being misleading or incomplete. Outcomes from such interventions can be complex and hard to predict, with spillover effects and uncertainty in how long the changes will last. The approaches as set out here provide a useful set of tools to support evaluators to overcome many of these challenges.



Source: Roberts, J, et al, [Evaluating area-based policies using secondary data: the neighbourhood management pathfinders programme](#), *Housing Studies* Volume 39, 2024 - Issue 7