



What can be done about the South Circular Road's problems?

Background

The South Circular Road (SCR) area is an established community on the south side of Limerick city with a mix of residential dwellings, including older Edwardian housing as well as more recent terraced and semi-detached houses, and newer apartment blocks. The area has been a residential area for most of its history; however, it has experienced some depopulation as people move out to the outskirts of the city.

The area has become home to more diverse populations as one approaches the northern side of the community. The SCR area is also currently home to a number of secondary and third-level educational institutions with an expanding student population, and a direct-provision centre for migrants. There is, consequently, a large presence of temporary residents in privately-rented accommodation as well.

The area also experiences a large volume of commuter traffic. South Circular Road itself is a sought-after residential location, due to the schools and the area's proximity to the city centre, though the built environment came into being in a time when fewer cars or people were accessing the area.

What is this brief about?

The research presented in this brief is the result of a Citizen Researcher Training Programme run in collaboration between local residents of South Circular Road (SCR), Limerick and researchers from the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), as a part of the 3-Cities Project. The 3-Cities Project focuses on children and youth, older people and people with disabilities, and their participation in their communities and cities. This brief examines the main question identified by the South Circular Road Citizen Researcher team: "What can be done about the South Circular Road community's problems?" In looking to address this question, the researchers were acutely aware of the changing nature of the community, the physical environment, the presence of litter and graffiti and the impact that this may have on feelings of safety and security in the wider community. The researchers also took the decision to focus more closely on the northern end of the community where the research question seemed to be particularly relevant.

The research in this brief assists in fostering a greater awareness and understanding of what helps children and youth, older people and people with disabilities to participate more in their communities. In the context of a community that has been experiencing change, as is the case of South Circular Road in Limerick, this is particularly relevant.

A combination of factors motivated local residents to become involved in the research sessions. This included a desire to understand the community through the various places it includes, and how and why places have developed positively and negatively. In addition to contributing to the project's focus on collaborating with residents to produce relevant research, there are a number of other important reasons why the 3-Cities Project team wanted to work with citizen researchers. These included: to provide local children and youth, older people and people with disabilities with a direct way to contribute to the research; to promote engagement with community issues at grassroots level; to help make sure that the 3-Cities Project is relevant to the lives of children and youth, older people and people with disabilities; and to harness the insights of local residents regarding what it is like to live in their community.

What can be done about the South Circular Road's problems?

What we did

The research presented in this brief was developed by two citizen researchers from the South Circular Road area who worked in collaboration with two NUIG researchers from the 3-Cities Project.

The Citizen Researcher Training Programme involved attending two workshops. Workshops covered the main stages of research, from developing a research question, to designing a research study, to collecting data and, finally, to interpreting and reporting what was found. Key issues around how to conduct research in an ethical manner were also covered. To balance the perspectives of the two citizen researchers, who were older adults, a young person who lives locally was recruited to help discuss and review the photos that were taken. The young person offered additional views of the photos and of the conclusions to the citizen researcher team.

Citizen-Led Research

The citizen-led research presented here is part of a range of research activities conducted by the 3-Cities Project team in the South Circular Road area. The 3-Cities Project research involved a Collaborative Forum with key community stakeholders, local children and youth, and older people. Despite repeated efforts, it was not possible to identify and recruit anyone living in the community with a disability. Forum participants identified important topics around taking part in the community that ought to be researched. In the South Circular Road area these topics included:

- Issues around the built environment
- Safety
- South Circular Road as a community of communities

In addition to guiding other research activities as a part of the 3-Cities Project in the South Circular Road area, citizen researchers identified a key research question they were interested in, which was based on these topics and which led to the following project.

Project: Photo survey of the community: challenges and opportunities in the physical environment

Research Question: "What can be done about the South Circular Road community's problems?"

Citizen researchers took photos in order to capture the information needed (referred to as 'photo elicitation' in research). When they had taken the photos, they reflected on what the visual data signified. They also discussed how change was represented in the photos. The citizen researchers used the photos to capture and explore the things that they felt were important to highlight in the South Circular Road area and things that they associated with challenges, and opportunities, in the community. The input from the young person added an intergenerational element to the discussion and to the conclusions drawn to answer the primary research question.

What we found out



Photo 1. "The [City] bikes are one of the best things they've done in this area and all over the city. And they are used. Unfortunately one morning all the saddles disappeared. It's a cheaper way of transport and it's not in a bus lane."

The above photo was a clear indication of the possibilities for improving the area by addressing the concrete issues regarding transport to areas within the community and the city. The photo is of one of four bike stands in the SCR and O'Connell Street areas. The bikes help to address commuter problems, mobility issues and promote healthy participation in city life.



Photo 2. "It's a pub on the side of the garages, it's a pub that's been closed down and it's been left to rack and ruin, and there are several like that around."

In this photo the impact of businesses being closed in the last few years is being captured.



The SCR area, being largely residential and a place that is mainly an employer through state-funded entities such as the schools and college, has worn much of this downturn well. However, the closer one approaches the city at the north, the more it becomes obvious that the area has been unevenly hit by this downturn.



Photo 3: "That's our little logo that we have up. It's just to remind people that it's locals who are doing it. We go out on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. It goes down as far as the labour exchange ... and covers the whole area."



Photo 3. "That's a plaque about the historical relevance, the history of the area. We put it up. The scout hall nearby, the IRA were using it and Padraig Pearse and a few others came down there and made a speech there."

This photo shows a local attempt to highlight how the SCR area has historical importance that merits, according to the citizen researchers, acknowledgement and communication in the locality. Promoting communities as areas that have participated in the life of the nation at different points of history is part of fostering local pride in, and understanding of what is at stake when such knowledge is lost and where the physical environment is left to fall into disrepair.

The role of local community groups, such as the South City Residents' Association, whose advertisement is pictured here, can be a helpful outlet for people, providing a channel for local engagement, a way for the community to keep an eye on more vulnerable residents and a means for keeping the community tidier than it might otherwise be. The photo portrays community associations in terms of local pride through local action.



Photo 5. "These are the places that were graffiti-filled, the walls here were all graffiti and dirt and rubbish and the whole lot. And then down to this [left] side you can see a load of rubbish bags. Down that way in the photo you can find anything; but this is the part that was painted."

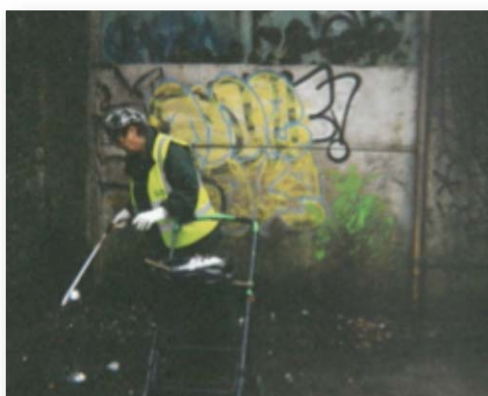


Photo 4. "This girl is picking up a syringe. This is part of the weekly clean-up."

Parts of the community have problems with anti-social behaviour such as littering and drug-use. In this photo a volunteer continues in her weekly effort to address this litter problem by removing rubbish. The volunteer works with other local residents who meet up every week as part of the South City Residents' Association (see photo 5) to clean up as best they can the litter they find. It is impressive that the efforts they make are not limited to the local SCR community; the group takes responsibility for surrounding areas in the city as well to foster a broader sense of city pride.

This photo is a good example of how some work has been accomplished, where the local residents' association has managed to remove graffiti from the walls on the right of the photo, but where the problem of rubbish remains, on the bottom left of the photo. It is an example of the community working to improve their physical environment as best they can.

What can be done about the South Circular Road's problems?



Photo 7. "This one then; look at the footpath; how are you supposed to mind yourself on a thing like that? Old or young, you can see the depth. Look at that for a footpath, and that would be common all over the place."

An awful lot of the footpaths are extremely dangerous ... you walk to Perry Square and it looks beautiful, and the paving is all up and down ... the footpaths aren't good anywhere; they have done some of the roads, but they haven't done the footpaths."

The above photo displays the difficulty of navigating many of the city's paths including parts of the SCR area. This kind of difficulty has the potential to create ongoing hazards for young people, older people and people with physical /sensory disabilities. While littering is a problem that people are implicated in, the state of footpaths is a signal that the local council itself is struggling to participate in maintaining the physical environment.



Photo 8. "I went over to the park and there was one couple in the playground. The park is one of the best facilities because there is not a lot for the locals, but mainly I see for the immigrants, because they are all

in flats and apartments and there's nowhere for the kids and they use it and I love to see them using it. Kids are out there, they're either in the playground or they're in the park. It's great because [otherwise] they [would] have nowhere to put their child."

This photo of the local park shows an area that the researchers felt gave an important space to children. With many apartments housing a largely immigrant population that are not typically visible in the community, this park is a valuable resource for integration and recreation.



Photo 9: "This is the parish hall and it's a good facility, for the community and for the OAPs, we have cards down there three nights a week. The parish hall is a good thing if it was used in a proper way."

This photo shows the parish hall, which provides an asset for the communities of St. Joseph's parish. Many people from around the south side of the city have access to the parish hall through organised activities such as card games and Active Retirement meetings. There is no community centre in the SCR area itself though, and the parish hall is itself a centre for the larger Catholic parish.

These photos show different places at the northern end of the larger South Circular Road area, from St. Joseph's Parish Hall down to Mary Immaculate College. The areas photographed show the amenities and assets available in the area, the need for other places to be protected and developed as well as some of the work being done at a community level to achieve this.

It was felt that while there are a number of assets in the community, these facilities are being used on more of an individual or family basis, and less as a community. There is, therefore, a lot of potential in developing a sense of common ownership and usage of the locality by a range of local residents.

Researchers also discussed the need for greater connection, for instance between local people and city-level decision makers. The researchers focused on those residents who have put down roots in the community over a longer period of time; it was felt that there was scope for discovering how other people, students, recent immigrants, and people with disabilities feel about their locality and how they might like to participate more in the community.



Conclusion and Recommendations

- The research team noted many changes in the larger community in the past few years, and struggled to make sense of decisions around public solutions to transport and the built environment. The community of residents have felt disconnected from each other, the local authorities and political representatives.
- The built environment is changing without as much upkeep as is needed being provided. Focused efforts to raise awareness of issues and problems can contribute to the enhancement of the area, which has amenities that many residents value. Greater ownership of the area by younger people, people with disabilities and older people can create a better environment for everyone and enhance participation for younger people, people with disabilities and older people.
- Maintaining areas, so they do not fall into disuse or become derelict, is a potentially important measure to communicate the ongoing viability of community areas affected by larger societal and economic forces.
- Providing a public area is helpful for people with children but, with little access to green areas, more is needed for the community itself to come together. Making contact with, and connecting with, potentially vulnerable sectors of society, such as older people and foreign-born residents is a worthy campaign for the community as a whole to consider undertaking.



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Project Lifecourse

Project Lifecourse is funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies and represents Ireland's most visible contribution to the growing international field of life course studies. This is achieved by combining and harnessing existing strengths and international networks from across the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (CFRC), the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (ICSG), and the Centre for Disability Law and Policy (CDLP). The 3-Cities Project marks the first major programme of work undertaken by Project Lifecourse.

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