

Living with social evils – the voices of unheard groups

This paper focuses on the social evils of British society as experienced by people whose voices are not usually heard. Researchers used workshops/discussion groups with lone parents, ex-offenders, unemployed and other vulnerable and socially excluded people to explore personal experiences of living and coping with social evils. Suggestions for overcoming them point to a combined individual and collective responsibility to drive forward social change.

June 2009

Experiences of social evils

- *A decline of community, values and the family*: participants felt important neighbourly and family relationships had broken down and moral values had declined, leaving them isolated.
- *Individualism and consumerism*: a rise in selfishness and the influence of celebrity culture was experienced as having a negative effect on society.
- *Young people, drugs and alcohol, crime and violence*: younger participants felt they were negatively stereotyped as troublemakers. People of all ages had been affected by misuse of drugs and alcohol, which was closely related to their experience of family breakdown, poverty and crime and violence.
- *Poverty*: the negative material and social impact of poverty was experienced across all age groups, and people felt their lives were held back by it.
- *Immigration*: migration was seen to bring some benefits but there were also complaints that immigrants were given unfair priority for housing, employment and benefits.

Coping with social evils

- *What people do*: participants dealt with situations by positive and negative means. Some coped by staying positive or not thinking about their situation. Ways of coping included escapism – such as alcohol – venting frustration emotionally or through physical activity, or turning to violence or crime.
- *Where people look for support*: participants turned to family, friends and support services.

What should be done about social evils?

- *Government and politicians*: the government is seen to have a key role to play in addressing social evils by enforcing discipline, educating families and distributing wealth more fairly.
- *Media*: participants wanted less glamourisation of celebrity and more positive news.
- *Business and financial institutions*: banks are viewed as penalising people with debt problems, and businesses should contribute to local communities.
- *Religious institutions*: the church could help put 'moral fibre' back into society.
- *Role of the individual*: there was a strong sense that individual action has an integral role to play in tackling social evils

Introduction

When Joseph Rowntree set up his three charitable trusts more than a century ago, he did so with the aim of addressing “the underlying causes of weakness or evil in the community”. He identified the evils of war, poverty, slavery, excessive drinking, gambling and the drugs trade as being chief among these. Now, a hundred years later, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is carrying out a programme of work to explore what people in Britain see as being the ‘social evils’ facing society today.

The first phase of the programme consisted of two main strands. The first was a web-based consultation, asking the general public to list their top three social evils. The second strand involved seeking out hard-to-reach groups of people whose voices were unlikely to be heard through the web-based consultation. It focused on these hard-to-reach groups through a first round of eight discussion groups and explored their views on the main social problems facing British society today.

The second phase of the programme aimed to further the debate, engaging other organisations in considering the findings of phase one, and looking forward to implications and possible solutions. This involved three strands of work: a series of lectures/debates, covering some of the more abstract themes that emerged during phase one; a series of think-pieces on selected topics that arose during phase one; and further workshops/discussion groups with hard-to-reach groups. This paper focuses on the findings from the workshops/discussion groups.

Ten ‘social evils’ emerged from phase one of the research and the aim of the phase two workshops/discussion groups was to focus on people’s personal experiences of living with these evils, how they coped with them and what – if anything – could or should be done about them.

Background

The Qualitative Research Unit (QRU) at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), an independent social research organisation, was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) to undertake the work with hard-to-reach groups, during both phase one and phase two. During phase one of the research, the following hard-to-reach groups were identified:

- people with learning disabilities/difficulties
- ex-offenders
- carers
- unemployed people
- vulnerable young people
- care leavers, and
- people with experience of homelessness.

NatCen did not set out to talk to all the possible groups of people considered less likely to take part in the online consultation. In this sense, the sample was never intended to be statistically representative. Instead, the aim was to select some of the hard-to-reach groups – people from a variety of backgrounds, ages, situations and circumstances who would be able to talk about social evils from a range of different perspectives. This same sampling approach was used during phase two of the research.

Although the project did not start with notions of social exclusion or vulnerability, most of those who took part could have been placed in either or both of these categories. What was also clear from the outset was that such people were likely to have direct or indirect experience of some of the very social evils which had originally been framed by Joseph Rowntree, or which had been identified by respondents during the online consultation.

Research methods

Sampling and recruitment

In total, three workshops and two discussion groups were held across England, Scotland and Wales between March and May 2008, during

phase two of the research. Participants were recruited via a range of statutory and third-sector organisations. These organisations were identified in a number of ways – some had helped to recruit participants during phase one; some were known by the research team to be working with the types of people they wanted to reach; and some were identified through internet searches conducted by the team.

To recruit participants, NatCen identified groups that were already convened in some way – for example, people involved in a programme, doing a course or living in supported/sheltered housing. Letters and information leaflets explaining the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation were provided by NatCen to staff at the organisations, who then distributed them to service users. These letters and leaflets informed potential participants where and when the discussions would be held (some were held at the respective organisations' premises, others were held in a public space, such as a village hall). Each organisation received a donation from NatCen for their help with setting up these groups and all participants received £20 for taking part in the research and giving their time and thoughts. During phase two NatCen worked with the following organisations:

- **The National Crime Reduction Charity (Nacro)** A charity that has over 200 projects in England and Wales working with ex-offenders, disadvantaged people and deprived communities to build a better future. Nacro helped to set up one discussion group in London and one workshop in Manchester, made up of ex-offenders and disadvantaged young people who were living in hostels. A range of different experiences were represented within these groups, including prison, homelessness, care homes, learning difficulties and unemployment.
- **Red Kite Learning** A registered charity and social enterprise that believes in 'equipping people with the knowledge

and skills to fulfil their potential'. It provides a diverse range of services linked by the themes of learning, work and progression, in order to help disadvantaged people back into employment. Red Kite Learning helped to set up one discussion group in London with unemployed people. Within this discussion group participants had a range of different experiences, including prison, homelessness, drug and alcohol addictions, mental health issues and learning difficulties.

- **Supporting Others through Volunteer Action (SOVA)** A national volunteer mentoring organisation that uses

Table 1 Profile of participants

Category	Number
Group	
Unemployed people	7
Ex-offenders	9
Young people living in a hostel	15
Young offenders / young people at risk of offending	10
Lone parents	8 (+1 daughter of lone parent)
Carers	10
Gender	
Male	32
Female	28
Geographical location	
London	16
Manchester	17
Wales	13
Scotland	14
Age	
Under 24	26
24–50	26
Over 50s	8

volunteers to offer mentoring and education, support disadvantaged or excluded people, rehabilitate and resettle offenders/ex-offenders, reduce and prevent crime, and provide varied and innovative services to help people return to work. SOVA recruited unemployed people to attend the workshop in Wales.

- **One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS)**

A national voluntary organisation, registered as a charity. OPFS members include individual lone parents, various organisations working with lone parents and others who support the cause of lone parents. OPFS offers training and advice on issues related to being a single parent through a telephone helpline, an interactive website and various publications. OPFS recruited a group of lone fathers to attend the workshop in Edinburgh.

- **Gingerbread/One Parent Families (Manchester)**

A charity that aims to build a fairer society for all families, in which lone parents and their children are not disadvantaged and do not suffer from poverty, isolation or social exclusion. Gingerbread offers information and advice to lone parents, through the Lone Parent Helpline, a wide range of publications, an interactive website and online helpdesk, free lone-parent membership and special events. Gingerbread recruited a group of lone parents to attend the workshop in Manchester.

- **Powys Youth Offending Service (YOS)**

A multi-agency service with representatives from social services, police, probation, health and the charity Powys Challenge. Its main function is to prevent the offending and re-offending of young people in Powys, by offering various services to young offenders and those considered to be at risk of offending. Powys YOS recruited

vulnerable young people to attend the workshop in Wales.

- **Voice of Carers Across Lothian**

(Vocal) A charitable enterprise that supports carers living in Edinburgh and the Lothians by providing information and advice. Vocal deals with practical issues such as benefits, service provision and understanding medical conditions, as well as providing emotional support in the form of counselling, group therapy and advocacy work. Vocal recruited a group of carers to attend the workshop in Edinburgh. This was an older group than the others, with a wide range of life experiences.

In total, 60 people took part in the three workshops and two discussion groups. The sample profile of participants captured a broad spread of characteristics, as can be seen in Table 1. While participants were identified according to the particular issue that was core to each organisation, such as unemployment or lone parenthood, in reality participants' experiences spanned several categories. For example, there were unemployed ex-offenders, unemployed people and young people with experience of homelessness and unemployed lone parents. However, for ease of classification, they have been grouped in the sample profile according to the main focus of the organisation that recruited them.

Data collection

In three of the four locations a workshop approach was used. In the fourth area two separate discussion groups took place instead of a workshop, due to the difficulties of getting people from different organisations to travel to one place for a workshop. During each of the workshops and discussion groups, an introduction was given to the study at the beginning, presenting the ten main social evils that were identified during phase one and giving an explanation of each:

a decline of community

- individualism and selfishness
- consumerism
- a decline of values
- the decline of the family
- young people as victims or perpetrators
- misuse of drugs and alcohol
- poverty and inequality
- immigration and responses to immigration
- crime and violence.

Participants attending the workshops were separated into two or three discussion groups. During these small group discussions and the discussion groups in London, the aim was to explore what participants' personal experiences were of these social evils. Researchers tried to avoid a long discussion around whether these *are* social evils, as this had been the focus of phase one of the research. The aim of this stage was to find out how people live and cope with the issues, and to suggest possible solutions for addressing them. The smaller discussion groups were then reconvened at different points throughout the workshop to report back to the group as a whole.

The discussion groups were recorded and transcribed. Framework (a method designed by NatGen for analysing qualitative data) was then used to explore the key themes. This was driven by three core questions:

- What were people's personal experiences of the social evils – do these issues resonate in their own lives and, if so, how?
- How do people cope with living alongside these social evils – how do they deal with them?
- What might be done to address these social evils – what are the possible solutions?

The rest of this paper is structured around these three questions.

Experiences of social evils

Ten social evils emerged during phase one of the research and the aim of this second phase of work was to focus on people's personal experiences of living with these evils. As in the phase one discussion groups, participants also talked about their wider views of the ten social evils and the impact they had on society. Some social evils resonated more than others in people's personal lives. Participants' views of the social evils were often discussed in relation to their own experience or the experience of either their friends or family.

A decline of community

Discussion of this issue was largely based on how well people felt they knew their neighbours and others in their local community. People's experiences varied greatly.

One perspective was that there was still a strong sense of community where people 'looked out for each other', whereas another was that such experiences were rare, as illustrated by one man who explained that he no longer knew his neighbours:

"I don't even know my neighbour, I mean it has gone. At one time before, you know I can remember way back, you know, but ... you knew your neighbour, you could pop round, the kids could play in the streets and that, it's all gone, all gone."

(Man, lone parent)

Three main themes emerged as having an impact on how well people felt they knew their neighbours: type of location, how long people had lived in an area and social changes. It was felt that living in a rural area made it easier to be a closer-knit community than living in a big city, where people were more segregated.

A further view was that long-term residency in an area could foster a strong sense of community. However, this view did not reflect everyone's experiences. One woman described how, despite living in the same village for 30 years, the 'community feeling' created by everybody knowing each other had been lost as the village had grown in size.

Older participants in particular talked of a sense that the level of care people showed for each other had diminished over time. One woman described how people used to borrow items such as sugar and milk from their neighbours and help each other out, whereas now neighbours would be 'shocked' if they turned to them for help. As during phase one, there was a sense amongst participants that the decline in community corresponded with a rise in selfishness, epitomised by an 'everybody for themselves' attitude.

Where decline of community was discussed more widely, the other issue that emerged was the social and physical decline of the community. Participants felt there were no longer enough activities or facilities for young people. For example, young people from rural areas described how there was 'not a lot to do ... other than sit around, talk and smoke', resulting in them congregating in the town centre, which often led to fear and stereotyping from older people (discussed in more detail later).

Individualism and selfishness

Individualism was less explicitly discussed than some of the other social evils. However, a rise in selfishness was associated with the decline of community. There was also a view that there were a lot of people who were 'out for what they can get' in terms of financial or material gain. In one discussion group a young man explained how he worked to help his mother pay their bills, a view that surprised another young man who thought he was 'mad' for doing this, as he took £20 a week from his mother.

Consumerism and greed

Consumerism was discussed mainly in relation to young people. Older participants talked about how celebrity culture affects the way young people behave, because they feel they have to have the latest designer items. Peer pressure was perceived as making young people more materialistic. Lone parents discussed their personal experiences of feeling under pressure to buy their children designer clothes. Young people acknowledged this and spoke about the pressure they felt to have the latest things in order to 'fit in'. Celebrity culture in particular was criticised because it made people think they have to 'have it all'.

Nevertheless, it was striking that other young people, in particular those living in a hostel, described how they needed clothes like everyone else, but that they didn't care whether they were designer items because they would much rather have a roof over their heads, warmth and food. This illustrates the relative importance of different things in people's day-to-day lives and how people prioritise what they 'have' and 'have not' got.

A decline of values

Discussion of the decline of values reflected a sense of generational shift. Older participants tended to talk about their experiences of this issue in relation to younger people. They felt young people lacked respect and described what it was like for them growing up:

"I used to get the strap and would be scared to death of doing wrong."

(Man, lone parent)

Discipline and moral education were said by older people to have declined considerably. It was argued that both should come from parents and be reinforced at school. However, it was felt that this was undermined by parents working rather than spending time with their children. Such factors could create

dysfunctional families, and the pattern was being passed on to the children.

A recurrent perspective was that 'political correctness' had gone too far, and that as a consequence young people knew they could get away with things. One man described how his car had been scratched but when he reported it to the police there was nothing they could do. Similarly, another older man recalled an incident on a bus where young people were causing trouble and when he asked them to stop, no one else was willing to say anything through fear of getting into trouble themselves. These experiences were said to be in stark contrast to their own childhoods when participants had known that they would be punished for wrongdoing:

"[You] knew not to get into trouble or you'd pay your penance."

(Woman, lone parent)

However, young people strongly felt that respect should be mutual and they described a sense of despair in relation to the way older people perceived them, many of whom felt stereotyped and discriminated against (discussed further below, under Young people as victims or perpetrators). Young people living in a hostel agreed that values were different from 50 years ago, but also believed that young people were forced to grow up a lot quicker today. For such young people this spoke volumes about their own experiences of having to 'fend for themselves', as one young woman explained:

"Fifty years ago a 16-year-old would have been living at home ... yes it just wasn't heard of ... people living in hostels and stuff, it wasn't heard of because, like, we are still classed as children back in them days."

(Young woman, living in a hostel)

The decline of the family

Personal experience of family breakdown was widespread across a number of groups, notably young people with experience of homelessness and ex-offenders. Three main causes for family breakdown emerged: drugs and alcohol, violence and broader social changes.

Drugs and alcohol featured was a common cause of family breakdown participants' lives, whether it was their own use of drugs and alcohol or the use of others. For example, one young man described the impact his drug use had on his family:

"...You don't go, go and see your kids and you don't do nothing, and then your kids are thinking, why, why is my dad not coming to see me? This, this is one of the issues that I've got at the moment, but ... I've made a ... point of going and seeing them regardless."

(Young man, living in a hostel)

In comparison, others talked about how family members' drug and alcohol addictions had led to violence, homelessness and prison sentences. These experiences were generally expressed by young people in relation to their parents.

Amongst the young people, violent family backgrounds or family disruptions, such as the arrival of step-parents, had led them to run away from home, spend periods of time sleeping on the streets, or staying away all night, getting 'mashed' with their friends to forget their problems at home.

People also spoke about broader social changes, which had impacted on family structures. These included smaller families that were more disjointed, largely due to people having to move for work, and the cost of living. Discussion of the increased level of teenage pregnancies was also prominent, although there

was some debate as to whether this was actually the case, or if it was simply increased media coverage. Older people in particular described how different things used to be for them growing up:

"If I became pregnant as a teenager I would have been forced out by my family and been considered a social outcast. Sex was something for marriage and we were terrified of it. People don't seem to see it as letting down their family any more."

(Woman, lone parent)

In addition to the causes of family breakdown, participants also discussed its impact on their lives. A common theme was that people's experiences in care had made them feel unloved, insecure, alone and angry, as this exchange between a group of ex-offenders illustrates:

F: "... So even before that, I was [in care] for four years."

M: "[I've] been in children's homes as well."

F: "I've just said that, didn't I, I've been in care, that's why I think that's why I turn to violence and to the drink, just I thought I was me own and no one loved me or anything, so. But then now..."

M: "Insecure feelings."

F: "Yeah. So angry."

M: "Angry at the world."

F: "I'm a very angry person."

In phase one, there was a view that single-parent families with a working mother and an absent father could lead to young people

getting into trouble. This was a concern that resonated with people's personal experiences in phase two. Female respondents in particular felt fathers had an important role to play in the family network and that young men growing up without fathers lacked discipline.

“... I've seen the friends that have one-parent families, and I've seen the ones that are a family unit, and every single time, the family unit is stronger, the kids are nicer. The whole network works because you need a family unit...”

(Woman, unemployed)

However, some male participants strongly disagreed and felt that, despite not knowing their fathers, they had turned out 'alright'.

Young people as victims or perpetrators

The age of participants was a strong indicator of their views and experiences of young people. Older people generally saw young people as perpetrators of social evils and described how they were 'getting away with murder', with bad language and antisocial and threatening behaviour. One female carer described how she liked to be indoors by seven o'clock, as she did not like walking past 'those hoodies' because they would not let her pass by without abuse or swearing. However, while one perspective amongst older participants was that this was something new, an alternative view was that older people had always feared young people, and that it was merely the context and appearance that had changed. For example, an older, unemployed man recalled being chased when he was younger for hanging around outside people's homes. He claimed that people used to fear 'skinheads' whereas now it was 'hoodies', and he felt nothing had really changed except the clothes worn by young people. Notwithstanding some disagreement about whether such fears were new, older participants shared the view that community decline and the lack of provision for young

people, such as boxing and football clubs, meant there was a lack of leadership for young people in today's society.

Perhaps not surprisingly, young people's perspectives and experiences varied greatly from those of the older participants. There was a strong sense of discrimination on the part of younger participants, who argued that people of all ages caused trouble and committed crimes, but that there was a tendency to automatically blame young people based on stereotypes, without really looking into the causes. There was evident irritation that you could be judged in relation to others or on the basis of suspicion. For example, one young woman claimed she didn't want to be judged by something a different young person had done, while a young man thought it was 'pathetic' that older people would cross the street to avoid a gang of young people.

Participants' accounts revealed a sense of frustration about being judged on the basis of appearance.

“People think you're a 'crim' if you wear tracksuits, trainers or a hoodie.”

(Young man, offender/at risk of offending)

Judgements about appearance could have material consequences. For example, one young woman described the problems she had experienced finding work because of the way she dressed. For her, a vicious circle was created by the fact that in order to buy clothes to get a better job she would need to get a 'scraggy job' first.

Although the general view amongst young people was that they were victims, there was also an acknowledgement that they could be perpetrators, as one young man argued:

“You don’t see a 30-year-old man in a suit going out and robbing another 30-year-old man in a suit, do you know what I’m saying? So the youths are to blame. I’m a youth myself yeah, but I can safely say, yeah, but the youth ... these days are corrupt. They’re seriously corrupt.”

(Young man, living in a hostel)

“I drink a lot, cos I get so stressed. And I smoke a lot.”

(Young woman, living in a hostel)

“One thing leads to the other. Boredom leads to drugs and alcohol.”

(Man, unemployed)

A view shared across all age groups was that the media was largely to blame for distorting perceptions of young people, by giving disproportionate coverage to a small percentage of young people who had actually gone off the rails. This relates to the issue of who is to blame for social evils and possible solutions, questions which are explored further on in this paper.

Misuse of drugs and alcohol

Closely linked to people’s experiences of family breakdown was drugs and alcohol (discussed previously, under The decline of the family). Participants’ accounts also revealed a close link between drugs and alcohol and crime and violence, as people described how they became violent when drinking or taking drugs (explored in more depth below). However, two main dimensions emerged in relation to this issue – their own personal experience of using drugs and alcohol and their experiences of others using drugs and alcohol.

Personal experiences of drug misuse and alcohol featured heavily in the lives of participants, notably young people, unemployed people and ex-offenders. There was a wide variety of reasons for using drugs and alcohol, such as boredom, being in care, bereavement, peer pressure, stress and escapism, as the following examples illustrate:

“It calms me down, cannabis.”

(Man, ex-offender)

“With me losing children, like twins and that in the past ... they were stillborn, when Mum was seven months pregnant ... I used to hide behind drugs, me.”

(Man, ex-offender)

Amongst young people, drinking was commonly viewed as a social activity, as highlighted in the following account:

“Drinking is more about getting drunk with your mates and having a laugh.”

(Young man, offender/at risk of offending)

However, participants who had experienced their drinks being spiked viewed the increased availability of drugs and alcohol in clubs and bars negatively. Thus, similarly to the experiences of participants in phase one, alcohol was considered problematic when used to excess.

Other people's use of drugs and alcohol was the other key dimension in participants' accounts. This was especially true of young people who talked about their experiences of relationships involving drugs, described by one woman as 'horrendous', and the negative effects drugs had on their family members and friends, such as crime, violence, homelessness, losing family, divorce and unemployment. One young person explained how he had seen his uncle lose his girlfriend and child due to heroin, whilst another recalled the physical impact drugs had on a girl she knew:

"... she used to look like alright, yeah, and like, now she's got a kid, yeah, and you should see the state of her, her face is all sunken in ... Yeah, she's dead pale, she's absolutely scruffy and she looks like a skeleton, she's just like just looking at er, you just think, 'Ooh my God, I never want to be like that', and it's just seeing, like, that just stops you from doing that ... no, just seeing how they are and they're like, they're desperate and they're looking on the floor for pennies and that to get money for their drugs."

(Young woman, offender/at risk of offending)

Amongst these young people there was a general view of 'what could be worth that?', 'why are you taking it?', 'what's the point?'.

People also spoke at length about the significant negative impacts that drugs and alcohol had had on their lives. Participants talked about being 'put off' drugs after seeing other people using them, periods of depression, not being able to function without a drink and losing people. One ex-offender described how drinking had nearly ruined his life:

"... I got drunk a hell of a lot, I've been dead because someone spiked me GHD, it was 100 per cent vodka, and I downed a full shot glass, so I'm lucky to still be here."

(Man, ex-offender)

Poverty and inequality

People's experiences of poverty spanned all groups and all ages. Participants tended to talk about the constraining forces of poverty, and two main themes – the material and the social impact of poverty – emerged in relation to the effect it had on their lives. The impact of poverty was particularly prominent in the lives of young people, affecting their identity and self-esteem.

Young people living in a hostel spoke about the difficulties of depending on benefits and the significant impact this had on their lives, both materially and socially. One young woman explained that 'it's hard' living on £48 a week, as once she had done her shopping she had no money left for clothes or to go out with friends. Participants shared the view that they were worse off (financially) working than living on benefits. However, they found it 'boring' and 'depressing' not having anything to do and got annoyed when people told them to get a job and assumed they were lazy.

Older participants described how their circumstances had changed over time in relation to poverty, summed up by this man's experiences:

"Two months ago, I was more likely just like you, three-bedroom house, full-time job, family. Now I'm homeless, skint, spending my daytime looking for a room just to close the door behind me rather than sleeping in a park. That's what I do every day ... I always had a pound note. Now, I haven't even got a penny in my pocket from day to day. I'm always on the ponce, I'm always looking around trying for something to do, someone to feed me, someone to give me a drink, someone to give me a bus ticket. I used to do all that on my own, and now for my daughter to [offer money] to me, I feel ashamed of myself."

(Man, unemployed)

Poverty and the factors that had given rise to it were described as having a negative impact on personal identity and attitudes displayed by other people. For example, one woman whose circumstances had changed felt she had lost her identity and power and observed that the way in which other people responded to her had changed significantly:

"Well because I don't have a job, and I'm a carer. If you meet people they just assume that because you are not working you are the scum of the earth, you are divorced, you are the scum of the earth, you know the whole thing."

(Woman, carer)

There was a clear sense, as during phase one, that people's experiences of poverty were also shaped by 'truncated opportunities' and not simply related to what they could not afford. Young people talked about how a lack of money 'held them back' as it made it harder to continue in education and go to university, which subsequently made it difficult to get a job because they had limited qualifications. Other young people felt they had 'no choice' not to work and felt they were 'victims because of their situation' (young woman, living in a hostel). Such experiences highlight the constraining forces of poverty in people's day-to-day lives, summed up by this man:

"Poverty's a trap, once you get into it, it's hard to get out of it."

(Man, lone parent)

Immigration and responses to immigration

Although it was felt that there were positive aspects to immigration, such as immigrant workers' willingness to do the low-paid jobs that people born in the UK would not do, and wider economic benefits, accounts of immigration were predominately negative. People spoke about how the make-up of society had changed over time. As one unemployed man claimed: 'you never seen a coloured person in Wales, one time ... that was very rare'. Other English participants described how people in Wales had taken a dislike to them when they first moved to Wales simply for being English.

Immigration was largely discussed in relation to three main issues; housing, employment and benefits. There was a clear sense of unfairness amongst participants about the way immigrants were treated in comparison to themselves. For example, young people living in a hostel who had been on a housing waiting list for two years strongly believed the reason why they did not have a flat was because flats were allocated to immigrants first. Similarly, an older male carer explained how he applied for council housing in

the 1980s but had been told that because he was British he would be put at the bottom of the list. This was an experience which he found annoying in itself and frustrating because it had ultimately resulted in him giving up a good career and moving back to the community in which he had grown up.

Participants talked at length about their experiences of losing out on jobs to people who were not born in the UK, as this exchange between young offenders/young people at risk of offending highlights:

F: "They get housing quicker as well and like jobs quicker and we're put to the back of the queue really, yes."

M1: "Oh yes, definitely."

M2: "I reckon it's pretty harsh."

F: "Because they're taking it off us."

M2: "Because it's like people who actually live in this country who's desperate for jobs and then some [...] comes along and just gets it."

Perceived unfairness extended to benefit provision. Participants felt that they received lower benefits than immigrant workers and they expressed concerns that their benefits would be lowered due to more immigrants entering Britain.

An unemployed female asylum seeker from Somalia shared these concerns, in doing so making a distinction between her own position as an asylum seeker and the position of economic migrants. She described how she had had to leave Somalia fearing persecution, but criticised other immigrants who didn't face such problems in their country of origin who moved to Britain and 'milk[ed] the system'.

Crime and violence

People's experiences of crime and violence were closely interwoven in their day-to-day lives

with a number of the other social evils, notably drugs and alcohol, discrimination against young people and poverty.

Drugs and alcohol appeared to be a catalyst for crime and violence in people's experiences as both victims and perpetrators. Participants talked about committing crime to support their drug habits, or becoming involved in criminal activity and violence whilst under the influence of alcohol, as discussed by these ex-offenders:

M1: "I've known people, I've pulled dirty syringes [out]."

M2: "Yeah, I've known that."

M1: "And security guards have gone to grab hold of it."

M2: "And stabbed him with it."

M1: "And you've stabbed him, you know with a dirty syringe."

M3: "That's horrible, that is horrible."

M1: "That's how low you can get to..."

M2: "It's the drugs and alcohol that brings a lot of the crime into it."

On the other hand, people described their experiences of being victims of violent attacks or robberies from people using drugs and alcohol. Often these were people they knew or family members.

However, crimes unrelated to drugs and alcohol were also widely discussed. Participants described their experiences of being in prison and committing crimes, such as robbing cars, shoplifting and vandalism. These acts were often provoked by boredom, lack of money and wanting to 'look cool' or to 'fit in' with friends. This view was shared by young people in rural areas who described crime as the 'only fun thing to do'.

Personal experience of crime and violence was particularly prominent in the lives of young people and ex-offenders. However, one older

unemployed man described his experience of being in prison for seven years and prior to that being in and out of prison every two years. He talked about how he lost his career through crime and violence because he thought he was 'a big man, robbing and stabbing people'.

Older participants tended to talk about crime and violence in relation to young people and there was an overwhelming sense of fear that crime had become worse, driven by high levels of youth unemployment and young people's lack of respect for their parents.

There was also a common view that crime was strongly linked to poverty as people had to steal to survive, but there was a clear sense amongst participants that 'it was not their fault'. This view was borne out by the experiences of some young people, who, for example, described shoplifting in order to feed younger siblings. One older woman also described how she had recently begun to experience poverty in her own life and appeared to empathise with those who had been in poverty their entire life and had turned to crime as a result:

"Well, I just feel that people will steal to get money to help them. It's not their fault, but this is a way they feel that they can get something so then you have your crime, and then you have violence and people fighting each other over it, so it's all a big circle isn't it?"

(Woman, carer)

Interconnected social evils

It was clear in this research, as with phase one, that the ten social evils were closely interconnected in participants' day-to-day lives. Participants themselves acknowledged the links between the social evils. For example, amongst the young people living in a hostel, violence was cited as one of the main causes of their family

breakdown and they described how the violence usually stemmed from their parents' drug and alcohol misuse.

Age played an important role in shaping participants' views and experiences. This was particularly evident in relation to young people and a decline in values. Older people tended to associate crime and violence with young people and there was a clear sense of fear and anxiety towards them in today's society. Older participants believed this was due to a decline in values and a lack of respect from young people, which, in turn, they saw as being linked with community decline and a lack of positive role models. However, young people did not always make the same link between themselves and crime and violence, instead describing how they felt discriminated against and stereotyped by older people. Both older and younger participants did, however, agree that consumerism put a lot of pressure on young people to have the latest designer goods in order to 'fit in' with others. This in turn put pressure on parents who had limited resources to buy these expensive goods.

Another striking finding was the extent to which participants spoke about the constraining forces of poverty and the view that people resorted to crime as a means of 'getting by' and making their way in the world. There appeared to be a level of acceptance of crime amongst participants, which highlights the attraction of an alternative lifestyle as a means of escaping the current situation. This reflects the notion of 'truncated opportunities' identified in phase one, whereby people felt limited and constrained by their situations.

Coping with social evils

A variety of coping mechanisms emerged from participants' accounts of living with the effects of social evils. This led to contrasting and competing definitions of what 'coping' meant in practice.

Internal coping mechanisms included the stories people told themselves, which could be both positive (e.g. looking forward to a different place and time) and negative (e.g. blocking the reality of the present). They also included both positive and negative versions of escapism – hobbies and interests on the one hand, or drugs and alcohol on the other. Similarly a desire to get rid of built-up frustration could result in exercise (both mental and physical) or verbal abuse and physical violence. Turning to crime was said to be another way of 'coping' with social evils, by making 'easy money'.

External coping strategies involved looking either to family and friends or to support services for emotional or practical help and support. Such mechanisms were seen as ways of managing the problem.

What people tell themselves

One form of coping involved thinking about things in a particular way. People dealt with issues internally either by telling themselves to stay positive, or not thinking about the situation and ignoring social evils.

Positive frame of mind

"Just stay positive no matter what. No matter how much you get run down, just stay happy, that's what I say."

(Young man, living in a hostel)

Having a positive frame of mind generally seemed to be based on putting things into perspective. Three ways of doing this emerged:

believing the situation would change, concentrating on religious beliefs or remembering that there are other people in the world who are worse off.

A belief that their situation would change was a recurrent perspective amongst young people living in hostels. This feeling that there were better times to come helped people to cope with issues they were currently facing, such as family breakdown and poverty.

Commonly, education was seen as the key to changing their situation. However, the young people who took part in the research argued that they faced barriers to a higher education, such as lack of money and no family support. Consequently, some saw experience rather than education as the way forward. Young people also talked about changing their situation through work, moving away, getting married and starting a family of their own.

"Me personally, I'm not gonna be poor my whole life, you get me? The way I see it, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, so I'm going to be rich. I'm getting a career and a job ... If you have it in your head and aim high, you'll get there."

(Young man, living in a hostel)

For some participants religious beliefs acted as a driver for a positive frame of mind. Believing in God, for example, gave people a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves. This helped people to put things into perspective and avoid a narrow focus on their personal problems. This viewpoint was particularly strong among the carers who took part in the research.

“There is obviously a great strength in the personal faith ... If you are thinking of the man up there or the God in charge, you are relating in a way to something bigger than yourself, and not necessarily your immediate problem.”

(Woman, carer)

Another way of putting things into perspective was to think about other people in the world who are worse off. Both young and older participants discussed concentrating on what they do have, for example basic necessities such as food and water, and comparing this with, say, people in Africa who are starving and do not have access to safe drinking water. Lone parents also discussed offering this perspective to their children when they complained about their circumstances.

Not thinking about social evils

A different approach to ‘coping’ involved ignoring the situation rather than dealing with it. Not thinking about social evils was a recurrent theme when participants were asked about coping. People said they would ‘just get on with it’ or put problems to the back of their mind.

“I just think you’ve gotta get on with it. There isn’t, like I said, there’s no coping method ... you’ve gotta get on with it ... you just don’t think about ... you just think, fuck it, and carry on.”

(Young woman, living in a hostel)

There were three ways in which people stopped themselves from thinking about social evils: distracting themselves by keeping busy and finding practical help; blocking out their emotions and not letting themselves get upset; or not thinking too far ahead and concentrating on one day at a time.

Participants discussed using housework and college courses as ways of distracting themselves from their problems. Not dwelling on the issue but turning to family and friends or public and third-sector organisations for practical help and support was another way of coping (discussed further on under Where people look for support). This could be about accessing activities through these organisations to distract themselves, or finding help to deal with an immediate problem, such as having nowhere to stay and needing accommodation, whilst ignoring bigger issues.

One key theme associated with not thinking about social evils was not getting upset. Suppressing emotions was a strategy commonly discussed by female participants. Displaying emotion, even to oneself, was interpreted as not coping with situations.

“Sometimes you don’t [cope] though, sometimes you do just break down and have a cry and you think, ‘Oh I can’t deal with everything’, but you’ve gotta carry on. But then you think, ‘What’s crying gonna change? You’re sat here crying wasting a few extra minutes of your life.’”

(Young woman, living in a hostel)

One single mother talked about having difficulty paying her rent and feeling under constant pressure but resolved that there was no point in crying because it was not going to get her anywhere. This resonated with responses from other female participants who talked about crying being pointless and having to ‘pull yourself together’.

Perhaps not surprisingly, older participants seemed less inclined to look to the future as a way of coping. In fact, one way of ignoring social evils was to take one day at a time and not plan ahead. Older participants discussed

blocking out the future because they could foresee further problems down the line, and just tried to deal with their present situation instead.

“I can cope with breaking it down into dealing with my life in days, rather than planning for the week or the month or the year. I don’t do that because I just find it creates far too much stress for me to have to cope with that.”

(Woman, unemployed)

What people do

Another internal coping strategy was doing something in response to social evils. Three types of doing strategies emerged: escaping reality, venting frustration and resorting to crime.

Escapism

Escapism was one means of coping. Escapism could be achieved through positive or negative mediums. Positive forms of escapism included listening to music, watching films or reading. This gave an opportunity to escape from social evils for a short space of time, and submerge oneself in a fictional place. This tended to be a technique employed by the carers and lone parents who took part in the research. Young people also talked about listening to music to escape problems and help them to relax.

“I can get lost in a good book, in a good song, in a really fantastic piece of theatre or a good film. I suppose it’s just finding your release. I mean people find their release in ... drugs and alcohol. I find it in theatre and dance so I’m a bit cheesy, but I really don’t care.”

(Woman, carer)

One participant said he read comics as a way of coping. When explaining why it helped, he said:

“It just does, you escape, escapism, it’s a release.”

(Man, carer)

More negative forms of escapism frequently discussed were drinking alcohol and taking drugs. These allowed participants to escape reality and temporarily forget about their problems. They were the coping strategies people used either to deal with poverty and inequality, or family breakdown. In order to cope with one social evil, they turned to another.

Drugs and alcohol were mainly said to be coping mechanisms for dealing with poverty. This was especially true of young people who talked about going out with friends to get ‘wrecked’ or get ‘mashed’ to forget financial worries. Ex-offenders and unemployed people also discussed becoming inebriated to ‘forget the burden of poverty’. A previously unemployed male carer discussed using marijuana as a way of relaxing when he was out of work and ‘thought life was falling apart’. When smoking marijuana, ‘... you are so mellow you didn’t give a monkeys about anything’. However, these older participants accepted that in the long run, turning to drugs and alcohol could make the situation worse.

“I suppose, in a way the drugs and alcohol is a way of coping perhaps with your situation to begin with and then it becomes a problem in itself.”

(Man, ex-offender)

Lack of family support, feeling unloved and being in care were all stated by young people as reasons for turning to alcohol and drugs. Escapism through drugs and alcohol allowed young people to forget about problems at home or the fact they did not live with their family. Although young people discussed this as a way of coping with their situation, ultimately it could be considered a result of *not* coping.

Venting frustration

Venting frustration was another form of coping. This could be done in an emotional or physical way. Emotions were vented through crying, writing poetry or talking to other people about problems. This allowed people to work negative emotions out of their system.

Physical activity was another way of venting frustration. Exercise was a good way to get rid of built-up tensions according to the carers who took part, such as swimming, dancing or going to the gym.

“When I get angry I get really angry and I let the little things build up ... I'll save it and I'll go to a nightclub and I will dance my butt off and just, I mean even a case of go to a gym, go on the treadmill, find a punch bag, beat the hell out of that, beat the feeling like you want to do it to someone else.”

(Woman, carer)

“I go swimming sometimes just to try and work off the adrenalin that you build up because you are that freaked out [about problems].”

(Woman, carer)

A more negative way of physically venting frustration was through violence. This could be physical violence or verbal abuse against others, or self-abuse. Those who had resorted to violence against other people talked about losing their temper when it was not necessarily the other person's fault and just 'losing your head'. This was discussed by both young men and young women as a reaction to family breakdown, feeling unloved and having no money. In contrast, an older unemployed man said that his violence towards others was caused by violence and disrespect shown towards his family by other people.

Venting frustration could also result in self-harming. By causing themselves physical pain, participants were able to deal with the emotional pain of family breakdown. This was discussed by two female participants, one of whom was a young person living in a hostel, the other an ex-offender. Through self-harming the participants said they were able to vent the anger and frustration they had experienced as a result of feeling unloved due to being placed in the looked-after system. Again, this could be perceived as *not* coping with the situation.

Turning to crime

Turning to crime was another way people 'coped' with social evils. Personal robbery, stealing, shoplifting, prostitution and drug dealing were all discussed as ways of making 'easy money'. One reason for this could be poverty and a need to have basic necessities. For example, obtaining food for oneself or family members was stated as a reason for turning to crime by those who had at some point been homeless. Another reason, cited by young women, could be coping with consumerism and acquiring consumer goods that were otherwise

out of reach. For example, in one group the young women discussed shoplifting as a way of getting hold of the hair and beauty products they could not afford. Finally, ex-offenders discussed crime as something people resorted to in order to pay for their drug habit.

Where people look for support

As well as internal and personal ways of dealing with social evils, participants discussed external coping strategies. Here, coping was seen as seeking or accepting help and support provided by family and friends or support services. All those attending the workshops and discussion groups had received some form of help and support from public or third-sector services, including those provided by the organisations which recruited them to take part in the research. Participants were also receiving help from other organisations and services, such as probation, counselling, drop-in centres and hostels.

External coping mechanisms included seeking both emotional and practical support. This involved discussing the problem with other people, managing the problem and finding solutions.

Emotional support

A common theme was the importance of having someone to talk to in order to cope. In the first instance, participants generally looked to family and friends to offer this emotional support. Others looked to professional support services or other service users in similar situations.

Family and friends were frequently discussed as offering emotional support. Talking to family and friends was said to help 'get it off your chest', 'release' pent-up frustration and deal with stress. Women in particular emphasised the importance they gave to having family and friends to talk to when going through difficult times.

One unemployed woman described the emotional support given to her by her mother when she had to give up work. She struggled financially and said during this time her mum had been her 'rock' by constantly talking to her about her problems and reassuring her that she was loved.

Service providers were another source of emotional support, especially for those without family or friends to talk to. Staff working for the organisations that helped recruit participants were said to offer emotional support when needed, through talking to participants about their problems. There were also participants who had decided they needed professional help in order to deal with particular issues. For example, one unemployed man discussed seeking counselling in order to help him stop drinking as he felt his alcohol addiction was getting out of control.

Views about the value of counselling as a means of alleviating and coping with social evils varied. There were both young and older participants who were positive about counselling services and felt that counselling had helped them come to terms with personal issues, such as family breakdown. Other young people said they would rather talk to friends or other people in similar situations than a counsellor, or that they would rather not talk about past problems but look to the future instead.

Emotional support was also offered through contact with other service users. Meeting people in similar situations meant that participants were able to discuss their problems with people who could empathise. This could also result in alternative solutions to problems being suggested and advice being given by those with similar experiences. Such social networks of people in similar situations provided an important coping mechanism for dealing with a decline in a sense of community, as this exchange between a group of lone parents illustrates:

F1: "It's just a bit of socialisation isn't it, a couple of times of month?"

[Others agree]

F2: "Getting together and having a brew and..."

F1: "By being in the group, you're getting, like, a sense of that community..."

Young people living in a hostel with other young people in similar situations suggested that this gave a sense of everyone being in the 'same boat'. However, although young people said they would socialise with each other, there was a reluctance to open up to others staying in the hostel; they said they would prefer to keep their problems to themselves. One reason given for this was an awareness that others had their own problems to deal with and so would not want to hear about other people's difficulties. Another reason was an insistence that they were trying to move on and did not want to dwell on the past.

Practical support

As well as emotional support, participants looked to family, friends and support services for practical support such as financial help, childcare, housing and leisure pursuits.

Family and friends were said to offer practical support through help with financial difficulties and childcare. Both younger and older participants discussed financial help they had been given by family members. Young people discussed receiving financial help from their parents. In some cases the tables had turned and older, unemployed participants had been offered money by their children. Two unemployed men, one of whom was homeless, discussed the embarrassment of having their teenage children offer to buy them new shoes. Although grateful for the support, they felt it should be them buying things for their children and not the other way around.

Family and friends also offered assistance with childcare, something that was crucial to single parents as it meant 'time to yourself to escape'. Single parents without such support from family or friends discussed feeling isolated.

"A lot of people had this sort of [help from family] every other weekend. I've never had that ... that sort of isolates you further in that you cannot, you know, because if you've got a free weekend, it gives you a chance to start a new life ... and meet other people. And so I remember thinking, 'Oh, I wish I'd had that,' because I never had that ... help as sort of, babysitting or just a bit of freedom or stepping in or anything like that. I'm very much ... kind of a lone soldier."

(Woman, lone parent)

Support services were said to offer practical help, for example, with housing and arranging activities. Although not discussed directly, organisations that had recruited unemployed people to take part in the research had also helped them to find work and apply for jobs.

Accommodation had been provided to most of those participating who needed it by various charitable and voluntary organisations. There were young people, unemployed people and ex-offenders who were either currently living in hostels or supported/sheltered housing or had done at some point. This was seen as helping people cope by giving them a roof over their heads, thereby meeting a basic and immediate need.

Drop-in centres and hostels for homeless people and drug addicts were mentioned as offering accommodation, food, showers and help with alcohol problems or giving up drugs. The importance of having a 'stable environment' was discussed as helping people to cope with social evils such as poverty, crime and violence and drugs and alcohol. One homeless unemployed man discussed problems he had faced in finding somewhere to stay as he did not have a drug or alcohol problem and so was not eligible to stay in many of the hostels.

Organisations also provided people with something to do. Activities were arranged for them such as trips to museums and theme parks or pottery classes. Lone parents discussed these activities as an opportunity to get out of the house and mix with other adults. Children might join in or childcare might be arranged.

Some activities could be considered an indirect attempt to change behaviour. For example, those with alcohol and drug addictions viewed organised social activities as a way of preventing them from drinking or using drugs as it kept them busy.

"If I were at home now, I'd be on my second and third pint ... so it gets me out, getting me doing things, meeting other people, instead of just sat at home."

(Man, ex-offender)

Other activities on offer were a direct attempt to change behaviour. For example, one young man talked about anger management and relaxation courses that had been arranged by the Youth Offending Team. The techniques he had learnt had helped him to stop becoming overtly angry and aggressive.

People cope in different ways at different times

The general consensus was that different people have different ways of coping at particular points in their lives. Coping mechanisms took both positive and negative forms, for example escapism and venting frustration, and were used by different people at different times. Although personal circumstances might affect the coping strategies used, participants also discussed individual choices and a sense of pride at not resorting to negative forms of coping.

This was especially the case with turning to music, films and books to escape reality, rather than drugs and alcohol.

"You couldn't get more stressed out than me, panic attacks and everything, but I still haven't reduced myself to drugs and alcohol yet."

(Woman, carer)

Again, when discussing the release of built-up tension, participants reported how people cope with situations in different ways, some using positive activities, others resorting to violence and crime.

“[Dancing is] a good way to let off steam instead of going out and committing a crime or being violent against someone that you don’t know for no reason whatsoever.”

(Woman, carer)

When trying to manage the situation and come up with solutions, there were participants who had looked to family and friends or support services to help them get their life back on track, even when committing a crime might have been considered an easier option.

How people cope was therefore said to depend on the person, as well as their situation, summed up by this comment:

“Everyone’s gone through different things in their life. Everyone has their own way of coping. You have family around you; you write it down on a notepad; you sit and talk to someone. Like people have therapy. You drink, you smoke. Everyone has their own way. It depends, with the person, it depends how strong you are, mentally and physically. Some people can go through the maddest things you could ever think of and they still cope with it, without having to talk to anyone, without having to go to another country, without having to want to kill themselves, you know what I mean? Everyone is like different, I think.”

(Young man, living in a hostel)

What should be done about social evils?

Throughout the workshops and group discussions participants were also asked what could or should be done to address the social evils they faced in their day-to-day lives. When discussing the role of others, participants saw the task as primarily being the responsibility of the government and politicians. A need for a more societal approach was also mentioned, with the media taking more responsibility, as well as business/financial and religious institutions. The individual was also seen to have an integral part to play in tackling today's social evils.

Government and politicians

Both government and politicians were seen as having a key and varied role to play in responding to the damage and misery which could be caused by social evils. This could involve acting as an enforcer, an educator and a distributor. These roles were not seen as mutually exclusive, but there was no consensus about which was the most significant. They tended to emerge out of discussion about the perceived failures of government.

The enforcement role identified for government arose inevitably out of people's concerns about lack of discipline, which in turn related to the decline of values and community. For example, it was argued that not enough was done to tackle antisocial behaviour, particularly amongst young people. However, it was felt that government sometimes wanted it 'both ways', for example enforcing a smoking ban whilst raising money from smoking through tax revenues.

"If the government don't want us smoking in certain areas why would you sell us the product in the first place? You're selling us a product that says smoking kills. You're still selling it."
(Young man, living in a hostel)

The educative role identified for government related primarily to the perceived decline of values and family. It was argued, for example, that government should do more to promote 'traditional' family values and ensure that children and young people learnt about values both at home and in school, as this conversation within a group of lone parents illustrates:

F: "... educating families, parents, children about values and you know, where they can go, give them a direction in life..."

Interviewer: "So it's not just education in schools, it's, because you mentioned parents there and..."

F: "Yeah, parents, yeah, adults and so and so."

Interviewer: "Where does that happen...?"

F: "Maybe ... to make it compulsory ... to have parenting classes ... children and maybe family classes."

The distributive role of government was born out of concerns about a variety of social evils, including poverty and immigration. These in turn could give rise to calls for greater fairness and prioritisation. For example, participants underlined the importance of government playing a role in ensuring a more equal distribution of wealth.

“[Government have] obviously got funding for housing, how much they can allocate to each person per year, whatever the budget is. And they must have money for NHS and things like that. Maybe they should equal it out better.”

(Young woman, living in a hostel)

A related concern here was that cutbacks tended to disproportionately affect the poorest in society. Concerns about the perceived unfairness brought about by immigration led to calls for British people’s needs and interests to be prioritised, as this conversation between young people living in a hostel demonstrates:

M: “There’s a housing shortage basically and all these houses are been took up by immigrants...”

F: “... by people from other countries, why? It’s our country, we should have priority.”

This was a particular issue for young people, who were concerned about securing housing and felt this should be a government priority:

“Just think with that huge shopping centre. They could have built thousands of flats with that, but they choose to build a shopping centre. It’s priorities, they’ve got their priorities completely wrong, and they don’t care enough.”

(Young woman, living in a hostel)

In addition to the collective role identified for government, participants felt strongly that politicians had an important individual role to play. This could relate to what they did, how they lived and how they responded to others. The underlying concern was often that politicians were remote from ordinary people’s lives. Participants argued that politicians should look to their own actions and ensure that what they did set an appropriate example. This was related to a view that politicians should take responsibility for ‘practising what they preached’.

“Politicians [are] at the top of the ladder, I mean, I know they do come under, they do get some stick and I, I think rightly so, because if you’re setting yourself up that high and to take a job with that amount of responsibility, they deserve the flak that they get. I mean, how can you have two sets of standards?”

(Man, lone parent)

How politicians lived was felt to matter in the sense that they could learn something from living within ordinary people’s means. Within the different groups, respondents discussed the idea that one way of making politicians understand was to make them live on benefits for a while, illustrated here by a conversation between a group of carers:

M: "Who was the guy that went and lived on state benefit for a week?"

Interviewer: "Michael Portillo."

M: "Michael Portillo, now he did it for a week ... he wants to try it for a year, not a week because at the end of that week he is, like, 'I'm going home to my big mansion with my big driveway'."

F: "And he's got something to look forward to ... and he knows that he is not going to be hungry and cold at the end of that week ... Whereas if he had to do it for longer then he wouldn't have that thing to look forward to."

There was widespread concern that politicians did not listen enough and that they should do more to ensure that people knew that they cared about the problems they experienced in their day-to-day lives.

"The government need to stop, listen and take action."

(Woman, unemployed)

The media

Alongside government, the perceived power and role of the media tended to provoke the liveliest discussion amongst participants. This focused broadly on three issues: what the media did wrong, the effect this had on society and individuals, and what should be done about it.

There was a common view that the media was 'selective' and tended to focus on bad news including violence, sleaze and scandal, as these carers discussed:

M: "[If] there is something good being done the media doesn't want to know, do you know what I mean?"

F: "They only want to know the bad things."

M: "Yes ... the sleaze and the scandal and all this."

A second area of concern about media focus related to the glamorisation of celebrities and celebrity status, even where they were involved in social evils themselves such as drug taking and violence.

"I think when you're talking about the celebrity thing nowadays, you know, I mean, everybody's a celebrity. You go in the big [brother] house and you come out a celebrity. These people are nothing ... they're not a positive role model ... The press follow them and glamorise them, and then you see young people are looking at them thinking ... is this good?"

(Woman, lone parent)

"It's the same with some of these football stars ending up in trouble. Okay, so they've gone out and they've got in a fight. Okay, they shouldn't have done it. Why is it spread across every paper? ... So the kids are saying, he's a great football player. He's making all this money ... He can get away with that, you know? If it's taken to court, it doesn't matter, he can pay that."

(Man, lone parent)

These things were seen as having a negative effect on society in a variety of ways. For example the focus on bad news could lead to low morale and promote fear. Similarly too much concentration on the lives of celebrities could create unattainable aspirations for ordinary people. It could also have a negative effect on an individual's identity. For example, the combined effect of talking up the lives of glamorous celebrities and talking down people suffering from obesity in the general population could be damaging to people's self-esteem.

Participants felt that the solution lay in a more responsible media with more balanced coverage of news which would include good news stories about the successes of ordinary people.

“We want to hear nice things now and again like the gentleman here was saying, it would be nice to hear oh, ‘Mrs so and so’s cat was helped and she is really happy now...’ There are so many negatives in the press. I think it’s bad for everybody’s morale.”

(Woman, carer)

“Promote success stories every week of some people, you know, not the children that have necessarily gone off the rails but the ones that have done some good in the community.”

(Woman, lone parent)

A related perspective was that local media had a particularly important role to play in providing information and news of relevance to local communities.

Business and financial institutions

Discussion of the role and responsibility of business and financial institutions in relation to social evils tended to focus largely on banks and credit companies. At the most basic level, the necessity of banks at all was questioned by participants, and their relationship with poverty and consumerism was interpreted as a particularly damaging combination. Concern was expressed about the role of banks and credit companies in relation to motivating consumerism and the effect on the poorest people in society.

“Poor areas ... renowned for low income, unemployment and all the rest of it, and that is where all these credit card people hit. They go there because they know these are low-income families, they are unemployed families, single mums, single dads, whatever, you know, well get them a credit card.”

(Man, carer)

Participants viewed banks as both taking advantage of the aspirations of the most vulnerable people in society and disproportionately penalising poorer people who were experiencing problems with debt. This was considered especially problematic in the context of the level of profits banks were seen to make.

“You haven’t got a job, you can’t get a bank account, you can’t set up a direct debit and that way you are penalised ... you’ve not set up a direct debit, they’re going to charge an extra £3 to pay that bill ... and the government in my opinion, you know, and all these big credit companies are doing nothing, nothing to get people out of it.”

(Man, carer)

Where big business was discussed more widely, the other issue that emerged was its effect on small business, for example the damaging effect of supermarkets (Tesco was singled out) on small local traders. This was implicitly seen as contributing to a decline of community. Participants’ views about supermarkets were not wholly negative, however, and it was accepted that they ‘did their bit’ for the community in some instances.

More generally, business was seen as having an important role to play in relation to local communities, both by investing in local infrastructure and initiatives and in creating sustainable employment opportunities, particularly for young people.

“Big businesses should be investing in the local community more because they don’t do much of that.”

(Woman, lone parent)

“There should be [an] incentive scheme for [big businesses] taking on children, straight out of school, with the promise of an apprenticeship or some sort of trade in hand that they can move the next step up.”

(Woman, lone parent)

Religious institutions

Although religious belief emerged as an individual coping mechanism, as described under Coping with social evils, discussion of the role of religious institutions in society was less prominent. Although some participants felt that they had a role to play, particularly in promoting values, others questioned their relevance in today’s society. There was an implicit acceptance however that they may have greater relevance in particular minority ethnic communities.

Notwithstanding this general ambivalence, there was a view that religion had a role to play. For example, it was suggested that the Christian church could do more to put the ‘moral fibre’ back in society. An example given was its potential role in relation to educating young people about values.

“The church should do a lot more ... Put the moral fibre back into Britain because it’s gone. As far as I’m concerned, Britain’s ‘kaput’. It hasn’t been great for about 40 years.”

(Woman, unemployed)

However the value of secular education and the role of religious institutions in this respect were not seen as mutually exclusive.

The role of the individual

In addition to discussion of the roles and responsibilities of big institutions, the role of the individual in relation to social evils stimulated a lot of discussion. This was separate from, but clearly related to, the way in which individuals coped with social evils in their day-to-day lives. There was a strong sense that participants across the groups felt that individual action had a role to play alongside that of the institutions discussed above.

Implicit in people's accounts was a sense that personal resilience was important in relation to the problems represented by and created by social evils. This involved personal responsibility and personal aspiration.

"I think that every citizen should realise that they have rights, but they also have responsibilities ... and it should be impressed on everybody that they might have the right to do something, but they also have a responsibility to everybody else to do it in a civilised way."

(Woman, carer)

"It's up to us to change our lives. That's the way I see it, yeah? I don't care how hard your life has been, whatever you've been [through] ... everyone can turn around their life."

(Young man, living in a hostel)

There was a commonly held belief that rights need to be seen in the context of responsibilities and, indeed, need to be shaped by them, for example in terms of the boundaries set by parents for their children. Parents and other

individuals were seen as having a responsibility to act as positive role models to young people

Personal aspiration in particular sat alongside the importance of tolerance (including learning from and respecting different cultures) and altruism. There was an emerging sense that people need to strike a balance between these forces, that being more satisfied could be combined with being less materialistic.

The responsibilities and aspirations of individuals were seen to extend beyond their own lives. The importance of individuals working collectively to influence big institutions such as government was noted. However, there were also perceived limits to the efficacy of individual action, even when expressed collectively. This was partly discussed in terms of self-imposed limits by individuals, for example, because of a lack of will, and partly in terms of limits on individuals, for example, because class could still influence who is actually heard in society.

"None of us are posh. If you can hear the way we're speaking, we've got a bit of a [regional] accent ... So if we went to the Houses of Parliament, they would not listen to us at all."

(Young woman, living in a hostel)

And it also related to limits to the power of ordinary people to influence structural and political change, as this conversation between two carers highlights:

F: "It's very difficult because individual people feel incapable of [making a difference], but I think nowadays people power is becoming more evident. You get marches. You don't think it is?"

M: "I mean they highlight a cause, but I don't think they solve it. I mean you've

got the stuff going on here with Tibet at the moment, I mean you'd think China would sit up and listen but they don't .. It's like the war in Iraq, they do marches, ... you highlight a cause but what's done about it? At the end of the day nothing, they are still fighting Iraq. They are still occupying Tibet."

Conclusion

The participants and the problems

Those who took part in this phase of the research had experience of a range of interconnected social problems, which had resulted in limited, lost or wasted opportunities. This conclusion considers how varying levels of control over, and responsibility for, truncated opportunities interplayed with people's acceptance and non-acceptance of social evils. Distinctions can also be made between whether people had succumbed to, or resisted, social evils, whether they looked to the individual or the collective for solutions and, ultimately, how and whether they coped with particular situations. However, it is important to remember that these distinctions are not mutually exclusive but are interwoven and complex.

As in phase one of the research, it was clear that the ten social evils were interconnected in both the perceptions and experiences of participants – experiences of one social evil could lead to another and continue in a perpetuating cycle. Participants were typically vulnerable and socially excluded and generally came from lower socio-economic backgrounds and had experienced inequality, either throughout or at certain stages of their lives. They described a feeling of living in a world full of recurrent and challenging social problems. As a result, they were able to describe the ten interrelated social evils in relation to both their own personal experiences and those of family and friends, as well as reflect on society as a whole.

Experiences of and reactions to social evils

Age and life experience were found to have the biggest impact on experiences of, and reactions to, social evils. Young people generally tended to look to the future and have higher aspirations and better expectations. Young people, ex-offenders and unemployed people tended to be more inclined to turn to negative coping mechanisms, such as drugs and alcohol, than carers and lone parents. However, there were

also differences within these sub-groups, as reactions to social evils varied from one participant to another, and from one situation to another. A key overarching factor which emerged was the extent to which participants felt they had any power or control over particular situations.

Control, responsibility and acceptance/non-acceptance of social evils

The notion of truncated opportunities which emerged in phase one re-emerged during phase two, with social evils resulting in, and arising out of, both internal and external constraints. Opportunities had not only been limited at the beginning of life, for example being born into poverty, but lost or wasted throughout life because of circumstances (e.g. the death of a partner) or personal actions (e.g. drug and alcohol addictions). Varying levels of control, responsibility and acceptance of truncated opportunities had impacted on responses to social evils. This level of control and responsibility could influence whether or not people accepted the social evils in society and their personal situations, or did not accept them and tried to change their situation or influence the direction of society as a whole. However, truncated opportunities were recognised as impacting on a person's ability to change their individual situation or influence those who could make a difference.

Feeling at a loss to change the situation, participants might ignore their concerns, succumb to social evils or resist social evils and look to more positive forms of escapism and venting frustration. Those who felt unable to control their situation on occasion ignored the situation, by distracting themselves, blocking out their emotions or refusing to look too far into the future. Unable to control the situation, women in particular discussed how they would control their emotions instead. Accepting the situation, they would suppress their emotions so that daily life could continue. When older people felt a lack of control, lower expectations and aspirations resulted in not looking too far ahead and just taking one day at a time. Older

participants were typically more inclined to accept limited opportunities, both in the present and the future.

Another response to feeling a lack of control and responsibility was to succumb to social evils. Living in poverty, with limited opportunities for improvement in their financial situation and a lack of family support, resulted in young people, ex-offenders and unemployed people turning to drugs and alcohol or violence as a way of 'coping'. Ultimately, however, these negative forms of escapism and venting frustration could be viewed as evidence that people are *not* coping, but simply accepting the situation and finding a release for the frustration and sense of loss of opportunity left behind.

More positive forms of escapism and venting frustration could also be used in response to feeling powerless to change a situation or society. Accepting the situation or the existence of social evils could simply mean finding a vent for the frustration left behind, through, for example, writing or exercising. Participants discussed with a sense of pride how they did not succumb but resisted social evils and instead looked to music, dance, reading and film to escape reality. Such coping strategies were commonly employed by carers in particular and generally employed by those willing and able to look at the bigger picture, those who turned to religion or those who remembered there were others in the world in a worse situation.

Changing personal situations

A feeling of control and responsibility could result in people not accepting their situation and making an attempt to change it individually, or looking to others to work to change it collectively. Those who felt they had some control and were responsible for changing their personal situation might try and find emotional or practical support in order to do so. This could mean finding help to cope or deal with social evils, through family and friends or support services. Not accepting the situation

could also mean having aspirations for a better quality of life. These aspirations were often discussed by young people, who talked about finding love, getting married and starting a family of their own as a solution to a current lack of family support. This contrasted with the viewpoints of older people with lower aspirations, who were more inclined not to think about the future. There were also young people who discussed education and a career as leading to a better financial situation and therefore better quality of life. Education was seen as a key escape route from undesirable situations.

However, there was an acceptance that truncated opportunities made these aspirations harder to reach and resulted in some people turning to crime in order to change their situations. People were said to turn to alternative lifestyles in order to achieve their aspirations if they could not be achieved by legal means. Crime allowed people to feel they could gain control of a situation that they otherwise felt no power over. There was a degree of acceptance amongst those who took part in the research that limited opportunities often result in people turning to crime, either to meet basic necessities due to poverty, or to achieve what was otherwise considered to be out of reach. Material aspirations that were unobtainable without turning to crime were seen as a result of a consumer society, individualism and greed – demonstrating further links between the ten social evils.

Influencing society and the political agenda

For those who felt they could individually influence society as a whole, taking responsibility could involve attempting to influence other people in society in a positive way, for example encouraging young people to respect others, or trying to influence responsible bodies, such as government and big business. Lone parents in particular felt responsible for encouraging their children to understand right and wrong, in a society where values were considered to be declining. There was a

common belief expressed by participants that alongside rights were responsibilities. In order to be a responsible citizen, aspirations must be balanced by altruism and tolerance, possibly resulting in people holding less materialistic values. Being responsible was also felt to extend beyond the life of the individual, to joining the collective to put pressure on big institutions. This non-acceptance of social evils was said to result in campaigns, boycotts and petitions. However, participants recognised that there was a limit to how far individuals could influence the shape and direction of society and the wider political agenda, not only because of lack of will, but also because class and socio-economic status were still considered to dictate whose voices were really listened to.

Role of government and institutions

Whether or not people felt they had the power to change society or their personal circumstances, they often looked to responsible bodies to make a difference, namely the government and politicians, media, big business and financial and religious institutions. Government especially was viewed as being responsible for making social changes through educating the masses, enforcing change through discipline and distributing resources better. The media was viewed not only as concentrating on bad news, violence, sleaze and scandal, but also as glamorising social evils such as drugs, alcohol, violence and crime. The media was therefore considered to have power over how these social evils were viewed and how people felt about society. It was argued that the media needs to take more responsibility in promoting good news stories and be aware of the impact on society that a glamorised portrayal of social evils can have. Those who abdicated responsibility for personal debt blamed financial institutions for encouraging use of credit cards and lending facilities. Even those who took responsibility for their own financial circumstances considered financial institutions to hold some responsibility for taking advantage of those with material aspirations beyond their means.

Collective responsibility to overcome social evils

Experiences of the ten social evils, how people cope and solutions to these problems were very real issues for those who took part in the research. The relationship between truncated opportunities and the sense of power or control (or not) that people felt was complicated and dynamic. This could result in both constructive and destructive forms of 'coping'. Perspectives on how far people are responsible for changing personal situations and for influencing social change varied both across and within sub-groups, as did views about the extent to which it was possible for change to be achieved. What did emerge was a sense that individual aspiration needs to be balanced, and even tempered, by collective responsibility and altruism. To put it another way, far from being mutually exclusive, individual and collective opportunities and aspirations need to be realigned if social evils are to be overcome.¹ This is resonant of the notion of the 'social aspiration gap' developed by the RSA (Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce) in recent years which argues that there is a gap between the people we are and the people we need to be to create the future we want. Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the RSA, has suggested that what emerges from this gap is 'an underlying need for a new collectivism (new in its aims and new in its form) which holds out the promise of enabling us to balance individual aspiration with social good but also of developing a richer and more robust idea of personal fulfilment.'² Despite all the contradictions and complexities that emerge from the accounts of those who took part in the research, this sentiment echoes both implicitly and explicitly in their accounts. People whose life opportunities have been limited, lost or wasted and whose day-to-day lives were often profoundly affected by social evils nevertheless wanted a better life for themselves and recognised that, in order for that to happen, a better world is needed too.

Notes

1 See also Creegan, C. (2008) Opportunity and aspiration: two sides of the same coin? Joseph Rowntree Foundation

2 <http://www.matthewtaylorsblog.com/2007/12/>

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The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has started a UK-wide debate to find out what are the social evils of the 21st century. This paper is part of a programme of work by key commentators on the themes that emerged from a public consultation. A book (Contemporary Social Evils), published in June 2009, summarises the findings so far, and looks forward to a post-recession future.

See <http://www.jrf.org.uk/social-evils> for more information.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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