

What and who is it we don't trust?

Viewpoint
Informing debate

October 2008

The JRF's recent public consultation revealed a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. This *Viewpoint* continues the discussion about modern 'social evils' on the theme of 'distrusting and fearful society'. Shaun Bailey looks at relationships between individuals, the state and community, and the effects these relationships have on our daily lives that may lead us not to trust.

Key points

- There is societal and personal mistrust between individuals and their wider community. This mistrust between different communities and races affects how and why we start to move into our own 'bunkers' and exclude those who look and sound different.
- Growing mistrust between adults and young people is apparent. The confusion caused by not giving young people clear boundaries has led many young people to be angry. It is good that young people have all these new 'rights', but what's missing from the conversation is their responsibilities.
- As with female crime, we seem to take greater offence when a crime is performed by children. Now we don't trust our children on the issue of crime, they don't trust us and are increasingly taking the law into their own hands; therefore we trust them even less.
- Many people no longer want to work with children because they feel the law treats all adults as a risk.
- There are many conspiracy theories of non-trust, such as gang rivalries. This allows us all not to make any effort with people outside of our friendship group. We all expect people to change to be like us and if they don't we treat them as untrustworthy.
- There is also a growing mistrust between us and all strangers. We live in what appears to be a violent world and this has a profound effect on trust.
- The learning and teaching of manners is socialisation at the most basic level, because it teaches our children that sometimes you have to give up your wants for somebody else's needs. The older generation recognise this behaviour and, when they don't see it from children, it makes them suspicious.
- Because we no longer live in a homogeneous society, individuals no longer know what to expect from other people's behaviour, which has led to a lot of uncertainty and mistrust.
- With globalisation, poverty and war, people live with more uncertainty now than ever before and this is, naturally, worrying to them.

Author

Shaun Bailey, co-founder of children's charity My Generation.

Introduction

I am going to start with the societal and personal mistrust between individuals and their wider community. This mistrust between different communities and races affects how and why we start to move into our own bunkers and exclude those who look and sound different. I will look at the mistrust between adults and young people, flagged up by many of the respondents to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's social evils consultation. I will also comment on the growing mistrust between us and all strangers, another theme touched upon by some of the respondents. Examining respondents' views and putting them in context with what I have seen in over nineteen years of youth and community work, I will also discuss what change there has been in this time. I will look at the relationships between individuals, state and community and the effects they have on our daily lives which may lead us not to trust.

Racism – do you really trust someone you tolerate?

Lots of white communities up and down the country feel terrified at the changes they see in their local areas due to the influx of foreigners of all shades in recent years. Some call it the 'browning of England'. The latest government projections show the population of England is set to grow by 9.5 million over the next 25 years, and 70 per cent of this increase will be the result of immigration. Figures like these make people worry. It is no longer the familiar Britain that people grew up in and this has led to a growing mistrust within our towns and cities of the people around us, because we do not readily recognise their cultures and behaviour – from different foods to different religions.

It is important to remember there is often a disconnection between a person's public and private life, so it would be unacceptable to call someone a 'coon' or post a sign saying 'No Irish, no blacks, no dogs' in a public arena, but in many households up and down the country racism is alive and kicking. This is indicated by the re-emergence of the British National Party (BNP). Many of the respondents spoke about there being "a greater fear of the 'other'" – fear and lack of understanding leading to dislike or even hatred of people who are of a different race. Public discourse is often very different to private conversations. Although there has undoubtedly been a big improvement in the way people express their racism, we are starting to lose some of the ground gained in this area.

The feeling of mistrust is so strong it has led to 'white flight' because the indigenous population don't feel comfortable in this 'New Britain', so they move to more exclusive areas to recapture a piece of the old Britain as they see it. The growing mistrust means we mix less now than ever before. While many migrant communities mix, the white community is often conspicuous by its absence. Many immigrant communities are accused of being insular, but I suspect they would level the same accusation at the white indigenous peoples of Britain because the frosty responses they often receive leave them in no doubt about how unwelcome they are. An illustration of all the mistrust around foreigners is the confusion over the difference between immigrants and asylum seekers. If you sit people down and explain, they actually feel it is right to help asylum seekers, but as they don't take the time to understand the difference they view all outsiders with distrust. Overriding suspicion of all that is different leads them to pass judgement based on stereotypes, a point mentioned several times by the respondents to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's social evils consultation. The media often play on this fear themselves with sensationalist headlines like 'Too many immigrants: UK tightens immigration rules'.

There has been a profound change in the make-up of British society; in our cities more than anywhere. It seems people are left feeling like they have no control or say over the debate. All they keep hearing is how good it is for the country and the economy but as far as they are concerned it's not good for the economy that they are in. Ordinary people hear sections of our middle-class, liberal media talking about how good immigration has been for the economy, but for them it just creates fear as they see the 'foreigners' coming and taking their jobs, jumping the queue in the big welfare line, taking their housing, scrounging off the benefit system and abusing the NHS, all of which are paid for by their hard-earned taxes. This has led to deep mistrust of anyone who appears to be foreign. They think "why are they here?" and believe they have come because Britain is a 'soft touch'.

It is not even a black/white thing – it's anybody they see as not 'British'. I, as a black man, often get a warmer welcome than someone of eastern European extraction – in London at least. British people have begun to believe that these people have deliberately left their country and come to scrounge off Britain, thus defrauding them of their heritage. They are thinking "I've paid all my taxes, now I'm not going to get a proper pension because they are giving all our money to the foreigners." This has led to a great mistrust between many working people and the state. This is where liberal-sounding policy-makers in the left wing of politics are far removed from the man in the street, who believes that only immigrants get social housing and therefore they can't get a house. It seems there is a disconnection between what the liberal intelligentsia believe and the reality of what people are really feeling. This leads to frustration and the charge "they're all the same", and people start to attribute the hardship in their life with what they see as the new competition. This is only fuelled by recent government figures that show that somewhere in the region of eighty percent of the new jobs our economy has generated in recent years have gone to foreign nationals; in ordinary people's eyes, this gives fuel to their fears.

British workers have also had to suffer the claim that they are expensive and lazy. This has bred real anger. One man who has used My Generation's job club in the past pointed out that while he has to pay British taxes and living costs, his foreign counterparts don't. Although he is not entirely correct about taxes, his sentiment about the fact that migrant workers can afford to take less money is shared by many. He said he knew of one house where 20 or more migrant workers were living, sleeping in shifts because some do night work, and splitting the rent. This meant their living costs are less so they can afford to work for less. "It's not that we don't want to work, it's that we can't afford to", he said. People's anger towards these, in their eyes, foreign invaders, is based on real fears; the impact of the speed that our society is changing leaves them feeling uncertain and deeply insecure about their future.

All of these things are happening in a climate where people continually talk about tolerance. Tolerance, in Britain, often turns into a quest to make everybody the same and this pushes communities apart. I think what many of these 'tolerant' people forget is the great amount of comfort and direction immigrant groups and many established communities draw from their traditions. Examples of this are family structure and religious beliefs. Integration is a key tool in combating mistrust, because people do not distrust things they understand and know. However, any attempt to make them change can prevent a group from integrating, because they do not trust the changes being forced upon them. The thing about tolerance is that it is the lowest form of human togetherness; in fact, it's not togetherness at all. In the words of one young person: "I don't want to be tolerated, you only tolerate things you don't like. I want to be accepted".

It is very hard to get people to tolerate others if they believe that their whole reason for being there is to steal what they have. Do you really trust someone you tolerate?

Responsibility – do we trust ourselves?

The issue of trust between the state and individuals is now entering our homes like never before. More and more of our private behaviour is dictated by the law and we are now even feeling the influence in our own homes and our most intimate and important relationships. You are no longer allowed to smack your kids. People shouldn't have to be told not to beat their children. People who do need to be told do not listen anyway. So this robs parents of some of their authority. What more fundamental relationship is there than the one between a parent and child? Is there any relationship more important than this for the health of society? It is not a loss to young people that they now have all these new 'rights', but what's missing from the conversation is their responsibilities. Children who grow up without learning responsibility become adults who will not take responsibility.

The current climate is to treat all adults as incompetent, dangerous or paedophiles and this is a clear sign that we are not trusted by those in power.

The powers-that-be are scaremongering so that they can take action against this, so that we will trust them.

(Suzanne, a parent working with My Generation)

We do not trust ourselves, or at least other adults. This is a definite change because in the past we would trust other adults to discipline our children or at least challenge them. We are quite simply beginning to fear children. How many people do you know who are prepared to ask children on the bus to be quiet? The ultimate expression of this is that we have the largest youth prison population in Europe, a multitude of new laws to criminalise young people at an early stage and a criminal age of responsibility of just ten years old. Although this came about as the result of a very specific case, I think we need to have a look at this again because it allows bad parents to avoid a big part of their responsibilities.

One of the features of youth crime is that there is actually more adult crime, and young people are more likely to be a victim than a perpetrator, but you wouldn't know this from reading the press. The way the press represent children is easier to believe than the official representation, because the official representation includes many, many excuses for the bad behaviour of children such as coming from a poor background, or boredom. The amount of children involved in crime is low, but growing. The thing with youth crime is that, as with female crime, we seem to take greater offence when a crime is performed by children. Now we don't trust our children on the issue of crime, they don't trust us and are increasingly taking the law into their own hands; therefore we trust them even less. The question is, should we fear them or should they fear us?

The perception often driven by stories in the press is that strangers are out to kidnap and kill our kids, and this is one of the most important losses of trust. We have ceased to parent as a society because all strangers are treated as if they are dangerous. This is even enshrined in our laws; any interaction between adults and children must be sanctioned by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB).

It is now very difficult to 'look out for' or discipline children at home, in school or on the street. People will no longer challenge children who are not their own for fear of the law. This has robbed parents and adults of their confidence and their rights when dealing with young people. Many young people are abusive and cocky because they feel they are beyond adult control. To a point they are right, because if you take action against a child, the adult is automatically seen as in the wrong. We treat all our children as if they are angels and that is definitely not the case. The number of times I have heard the words "I'll sue you" is unbelievable. It is an expression of the new-found power that children enjoy over adults and which they are well prepared to use.

Another more alarming example is that of children attacking adults. This has been one of the major changes I have seen during my years in youth work. We have handed power over to children which means we often cannot act in their best interests, because as parents and adults we unreasonably fear the rights of children and the power of the people who administer them. Many children have been left unprotected by the adults around them and this is why we are now seeing a rise in bullying, because young bullies thrive in an environment without adult control. Amina, aged 14, feels she cannot trust her school, because they say one thing, and do another and this leaves her with a lack of faith in an institution that is meant to protect and encourage her.

The rise in the power and size of the industry around children's rights has fundamentally changed the relationship between children, parents and society. Indeed, they are no longer called children, they are called young people. I dislike this term as it suggests they are a separate body of people and that they understand the responsibilities that come with such a title. I have used this term throughout because it is a term most people understand. However, they are not separate, they are our children and the responsibility lies with us for their safety and future, not with them or an agency. We claim to be doing things for their protection but it looks to me as if we are setting up systems in law that allow us not to take responsibility for our children. We have a system that is happy to fill the role of parent or at least says it will, but we all know that the authorities are the worst parents.

For example, on the issue of health and safety, we wrap our children in cotton wool to the point where schools can't take pupils off the premises for fear of prosecution, or your fourteen-year-old daughter can have an abortion without your knowledge or consent. This is important because the assertion that parents will not do what is right for their children is not lost on the young. This kind of change in our thinking tells children that even those people closest to them cannot be trusted, and if this is the case why would they think they can trust anyone else? Although I understand the need for rules and guidelines around children, we must trust the parents involved to carry out their jobs.

Many people no longer want to work with children who are not related to them because they feel the law treats all adults as a risk. This has had a profound effect on the voluntary sector; many people no longer work with children, especially men. If a man wanted to work with young children he would be viewed with suspicion. Is this why we have so few male primary school teachers? Much of the anti-social behaviour carried out by young boys in particular is based on their false ideas about what it is to be a successful man and it could be argued that this stems from a lack of trustworthy male role models. Indeed all adult–youth interaction now has to have the seal of approval of the CRB check. This licensing of adults is the government's response to our fear of other people and can often breed mistrust.

This means much of children's bad behaviour goes unchallenged and worsens to the point that we are now officially terrified of our own children. The 'mosquito', anyone? This is a horrible device that emits a high-pitched sound that only young people can hear, to scare them away.

Children – friend or foe? A small minority have a big effect

The consultation's web respondents seem to be split between the views that young people are the problem or that young people suffer from the problem (perpetrators or victims). Bad behaviour by a small minority of children has a big effect on the level of trust we have with all children. Neglect puts children in survival mode; by this I mean we have left them to their own devices. An example of this is that many young people don't feel safe on the streets and so arm themselves for protection. Safety in our public areas should be the concern of adults, not armed children. When asking a 17-year-old boy that I work with if he would report to the police that he'd had been 'jumped' (attacked), his stunned reply was "Why? What can they do about it?" – giving a clear indication that he believes the powers-that-be are useless.

Another example is the exposure of our children to sexual and violent materials. Watch an hour of MTV Base, listen to any rap music, watch the films or read the teen magazines that are popular with young people and you will see some extreme behaviour portrayed as the norm. Young people then reflect this in their behaviour and we punish them for it. This is why some respondents were of the opinion that young people are victims of circumstance and why other respondents believed that adults are the victims of young people's behaviour. The confusion caused by not giving young people clear boundaries has led many to be angry. Once children, or indeed adults, are angry their behaviour becomes unpredictable and extreme.

The kids I work with may not speak to you in these 'big picture' terms but they do understand that they are under pressure. In the words of one 16-year-old, when asked "Do you feel safe on the street", to my surprise he answered "Yes". When I asked him why, he said with a smile, "I have a borer and I know everyone in my area." A 'borer' is London slang for a knife. The most telling part of what he says is not the fact that he carries a knife, though this is alarming, it's the fact he feels secure in the knowledge that he knows everyone in his area. This means that he views anyone he doesn't know as a threat. Imagine walking around viewing almost everyone as a threat. This level of mistrust is far higher than when I was a 17-year-old boy. It also transforms people's behaviour. It is why so many young people swagger about as if they own the place; it's a front to ward off the threat of others. Another reaction to this is to hide under their hoodies. Their defensive bravado can then evolve into an offensive form of intimidation. Also, if you factor in that to be criminally involved is seen as cool in youth culture, in the words of one of the world's most famous rappers, Tupac, "crime pays". If you watch how groups of kids rob and assault an adult, it often starts out as a game which is pushed further and further until the point of no return when they attack. Then, when the adult reacts defensively, they use that as an excuse for their attack.

These relationships have been changed. Many people believe that if you give children what they want, it is enough to see them through. The current generation of children are notorious for being spoilt. Anybody who has children will tell you they know a lot about what they want and little about what they need. That is why many respondents to the consultation spoke in terms of young people "having a loss of respect for all human life", and spoke of "undisciplined young people with no manners, no self-control and no respect for anything." Because the respondents can see that, relative to when they were young, young people today receive a lot of extra help and still seem to misbehave.

The low opinion of young people held by a growing section of society is based on a number of factors. The main thing is the continuing development of the teenager – the new, global western youth culture based on disrespect, money, sex and violence which stem from major aspects of our adult culture. Our youth also do not trust us because we say one thing then do another. An example of this is our attitude to drinking: we tell them not to drink but we drink to excess. The situation is set to worsen as we raise our children in a climate of mistrust. One of the key differences between my childhood and that of the kids I work with is being able to trust your friends. Of the last two murders around our way, one was a set-up and the other was a so-called friend killing another. One of the lesser-known things about gang membership is the high level of violence and intimidation within the gang itself. This is often an unpleasant surprise to younger children who have been groomed to become members and this is hidden from them until it's too late.

There are also conspiracy theories of distrust. These allow us all not to make any effort with people outside of our friendship group. We all expect people to change to be like us and if they don't we treat them as untrustworthy. Young people's mistrust of adults is largely based on their limited experience of not being able to trust their contemporaries. So many young people now grow up surrounded by criminals and criminal activity that they form what for them is a very normal paranoia. There is no honour amongst thieves and when you are surrounded by them, it doesn't pay to have honour yourself.

A really interesting example of this is one of the young boys I worked with called Jake*. He met another boy in jail called Tao*, where they agreed to help rob each other's gang. When they got out of jail, Jake lent his gang's only gun to Tao who then used it to rob Jake's gang. The key point from this story is that these two boys, when with their prospective gangs, acted normally. This just goes to show a really selfish nature; as Tao said to me, "get rich, or die trying!" This is a term popularised by 50 Cent, an American rap star, and it goes to the heart of one of the major problems for all our young people – the fact that individualism and greed take precedence over friendship and trust. This is a major theme touched upon by many of the respondents.

* not real names

Lack of manners – small but important

When it comes to manners, I don't just mean people being courteous to one another. I am talking about what the learning and teaching of manners does. This is socialisation at the most basic level, because it teaches our children that sometimes you have to give up your wants for somebody else's needs. The older adult generation recognise this behaviour and when they don't see it from children, it makes them suspicious. This is not new. Since the advent of 1950s teenagers, the older generation of the British public have viewed youngsters with a little contempt, but in recent times this has turned to outright hostility and fear. The lack of manners, as adults see it, is one of the driving factors behind this change and the primary sign that the two groups don't share a value system and have very different social protocols. One example is use of language. When was the last time you called someone "my bitch" as a term of endearment? Do you refer to your best friend as "big dog"? Adults see younger people as less concerned about the common good.

Much of the fear of crime is based on the lack of manners, which leads to a barrier of misunderstanding and distrust between young and old. This is shown by the fact that much of what is normal behaviour for young people is seen by adults as anti-social behaviour – for example, the phenomenon of children playing their music on public transport without headphones. This shows a lack of concern about how anybody else may feel about the noise. It is important because it shows they have not even made an attempt to consider the comfort of other people, because our teenagers feel it is their right, as taught to them by us. If adults fail to teach young people good behaviour such as manners and then punish them for not using them, why should they trust us? These manners are not confined to children, but more identified with them and, as in most societies, we are more offended by bad behaviour in children; I think this is because manners are expected.

Our children are significantly different from their counterparts outside the Western world, where there is generally a less liberal view on child-rearing. A demonstration of this is the amount of time young people spend socialising with their adult guardians, which provides an environment to develop their soft skills and engenders trust and respect between adults and children. There is not enough of this in Western society – we are always trying to find someone else to look after our children or at least take responsibility for their behaviour. In short, this leads to a society which is not child-friendly because adults outside of a child's family group feel no responsibility for children in general and often see children as a problem. What I am saying is that our lack of trust in our children is entirely of our own making: we do not spend enough time working on this and the way we talk about other adults leads children to distrust anyone who is not an 'official'. They are just responding to the treatment we give them, and the stories they hear say that we don't trust them, so they don't trust us.

Lack of trust can also be about lack of control. If you are dependent upon others and have no control or say over the most basic parts of your life, you will find it hard to trust anyone.

Living in a bubble – the price of individualism

Concentration on the rights of the individual has been part of the move toward individualism and selfishness. It has been done at the cost of the community and family. For example, we no longer teach our children that they are part of a wider community, which they should support and which will in turn support them, as a place where they can expect to find trustworthy people.

Respondents to the consultation said they felt that despite the apparent preference for life of this kind, individualism has damaging consequences, such as an "unconscious sense of fear and hopelessness" because individuals know they cannot survive alone in a complex society. Is this the result of mistrust of one another or is it stupidity? I say that because when you are in prison and they want to punish you, they put you into solitary confinement. So why would people want to punish themselves by doing this of their own free will? Or should I say, why would they not fight against it happening to them? This is where the feeling of helplessness starts to affect people's ability to be happy because we feel like we cannot affect our own world. Consequently we put all our hopes and trust in a liberal ideology that many feel has delivered the opposite to what we all say we want.

We live in what appears to be such a violent world and this has a profound effect on trust. Ask anybody who has been attacked in the street or anyone else for that matter, if they feel like they will be able to trust a stranger anytime soon. The answer will definitely be "no". One of the most horrible things for young people, and black men in particular, is that they are seen as dangerous. It is soul-destroying to see people cross the road or look at you uncomfortably because of who you are. The frustrations of this turn into anger and some start to think "OK, I will be what they think I am". Of course we distrust others when we are constantly told how dangerous the world and the people in it are. This has led to a rise in the 'walk past and don't get involved' culture which leaves people doubting the very nature of humans or at least British people.

Conclusion

Throughout this *Viewpoint* you will see the word 'behaviour' mentioned again and again, because a lack of trust influences our behaviour in a way other phenomena don't. If a person or community doesn't feel safe, they will take action which is not always predictable. This is happening more and more and because we no longer live in a homogeneous society, individuals no longer know what to expect from other people's behaviour, which has led to a lot of uncertainty and mistrust.

When you add this to the big questions of the day, such as globalisation, poverty and war, people live with more uncertainty now than ever before and this is, naturally worrying to them. The basic problem is we believe in systems, we are raised on them, we are told how great they are and when these systems fail to work, the trust is broken. Ultimately, trust is hard to earn and easy to break!