

Modern-day social evils

The voices of unheard
groups

Alice Mowlam and
Chris Creegan,
Qualitative Research
Unit, National Centre
for Social Research.

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Executive summary

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) is exploring what people see as the main ‘social evils’ facing British society today. As well as undertaking a web-based consultation with the general public (the subject of a separate report), the first stage of work also sought out the views of groups of people less likely to be reached by the web-based consultation (the focus of this report).

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) is exploring what people see as the main ‘social evils’ facing British society today. As well as undertaking a web-based consultation with the general public (the subject of a separate report¹), the first stage of work also sought out the views of groups of people whose voices are often unheard, who were less likely to be reached by the web-based consultation (the focus of this report).

Research methods

Eight discussion groups were held across England and Scotland in autumn 2007. Participants were recruited via a range of charitable organisations working with a range of people. Beginning with an open discussion of the main social evils facing British society today, participants then considered some of the web consultation responses and the relevance today of the social evils originally identified by Joseph Rowntree. The discussion groups were recorded and transcribed, with analysis focusing on what were the top themes discussed, how people talked about social evils and any notable demographic or regional differences.

Discussion groups were held with:

- People with learning disabilities;
- Ex-offenders;
- Carers;
- Unemployed people;
- Vulnerable young people;
- Care leavers; and
- People with experience of homelessness.

It was not possible to talk to *all* the possible groups of people considered less likely to be heard. The aim was to select *some* of these groups: people from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances who would be able to talk about social evils from a range of different perspectives. Analysis of responses to the on-line consultation revealed low numbers of young people and people from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, which also influenced the choice of groups for this part of the work.

Findings from the discussion groups

Responses to the term ‘social evil’ varied. Whilst the term resonated immediately for some, others were less clear. However, in all groups, the subject provoked lively discussion. The issues most debated were complex social problems, with no obvious ‘right’ or ‘wrong’,

¹ What are today’s social evils? The results of a web consultation

such as drug use. In contrast, some issues, such as sexual abuse of children, were seen as absolute moral wrongs.

The main themes identified were:

- **Excessive use of drugs and alcohol**
Discussed in all the groups, drugs and alcohol were described as being problematic when used to excess, rather than being inherently evil. Participants saw a strong link between drugs and other social evils, especially youth gangs, guns and violence. Using drugs and alcohol was described by some as a welcome, if temporary, relief from problems, whilst recognising the personal choice involved in deciding to use.
- **Decline of family**
Personal experience of family breakdown was widespread, with many negative consequences described. For example, participants discussed feeling unloved and uncared for or ending up in care. Family life was seen to have changed, with more lone parents and working parents meaning less time to nurture a family.
- **Decline of community**
Seen as being closely linked with poverty, crime and violence, participants talked about the chaotic, frightening world outside the front door. A change in society was perceived, with people nowadays looking out for themselves and no longer caring about their neighbours.
- **Crime and violence**
Another issue which participants had a lot of personal experience of, especially those living in inner-city areas. People described feeling wary of certain groups, especially groups of young people. Young people, on the other hand, talked about their experiences of being stereotyped.

- **Poverty**
Participants experienced poverty as a constraining force that limited aspirations and opportunities. The widening gap between rich and poor was also described, with those at the lower end feeling trapped there.
- **Immigration and unfairness**
Key to discussions of immigration was a perceived unfairness in the way refugees and asylum-seekers were treated in comparison with UK citizens, such as with regard to housing. People felt there was a lack of control over who was coming into the country, with criminals and even terrorists being allowed in. However, the benefits to our economy of immigrant workers were also recognised.

Truncated opportunities

A strong underlying theme threading through and interconnecting the social evils discussed above was that of truncated opportunities – opportunities cut short and limited by circumstances. The people who took part in this research were experiencing a range of challenging social problems. These experiences left people feeling unable to fulfil their potential because of the limited nature of choices and opportunities available to them. Education was recognised as a possible escape route but barriers to it were identified, including cost and the lure of alternative but unsuitable lifestyle choices such as involvement in drug dealing.

Who or what influences social evils?

During the discussions, participants had a tendency to want to blame someone or something for the social evils being discussed.

The following influences on social evils were highlighted:

- **The media**
Discussion of the media focused on its perceived manipulation of public opinion. In terms of popular culture, violence and unhealthy or undesirable behaviours were seen as being glamorised.
- **Government**
The government was seen to have a link to all of the social evils discussed and was criticised for not dealing effectively with the problems raised.
- **Religion**
Religious faith itself was not seen as being a social evil. Instead, the way that some religions were organised and practised was seen to be problematic. Religious extremism was perceived as a significant contemporary problem.
- **Big business**
Large corporate business was seen to be a key driver of today's capitalist society, with the widening gap between rich and poor often raised as a negative consequence.

Conclusion

Among the sixty participants who took part in these discussion groups, there was a huge level of diversity – of background, life experience and viewpoint. Some significant similarities emerged however. First, people had personal experience of living in the midst of the social evils being discussed, and their consequences. Second, there was a shared sense of truncated life opportunities. Opportunities had been limited, lost and wasted and the result was often entrenched exclusion. Whilst blame for social evil was sometimes attributed to external factors, the role of personal responsibility and choice was also recognised. People want to overcome social evil. How they might do so is something that will be explored in the next stage of this programme of work.

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 analysis of these responses is the subject of a separate report.² The second strand involved seeking out hard-to-reach groups of people whose voices were unlikely to be heard through the web-based consultation. This report focuses on these ‘unheard voices’ and explores their views on the main social problems facing British society today.

² What are today's social evils? The results of a web consultation

Background

The Qualitative Research Unit (QRU) at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), an independent social research organisation, was commissioned by JRF to undertake this work. The priority was to try to include those people least likely to have heard about the initiative and those least likely to take part without a specific attempt to reach them. With this in mind, the following groups were identified:

- People with learning disabilities;
- Ex-offenders;
- Carers;
- Unemployed people;
- Vulnerable young people;
- Care leavers; and
- People with experience of homelessness.

The decision was also informed by analysis of the types of people who were participating in the on-line consultation, which revealed low numbers of young people and people from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups.

NatCen did not set out to talk to *all* the possible groups of people considered less likely to get involved in the on-line consultation. In this sense, the sample was never intended to be statistically representative. Instead, the aim was to select *some* of these 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, enabling mapping of the major themes raised. Although the project did not start with the notions of social exclusion or vulnerability, most of those who took part could have been placed in either or both 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 in the website consultation.

In total, eight discussion groups were held across England and Scotland in September and October 2007. Participants were recruited via a range of charitable organisations. These charities were identified in a number of ways: some were known by the research team to be working with the types of people they wanted to reach; JRF made some suggestions; and the team did some research on the internet.

As there was very little time available in which to recruit participants, NatCen aimed to identify groups that were already convened in some way – for example, people involved in a programme, doing a course or sharing accommodation. This proved to be a fruitful approach and generally pre-existing meeting times could be used for the discussion groups.

Letters and information leaflets explaining the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation were provided by NatCen to staff at the charities, who then distributed them to service users. These informed potential participants where and when the discussions would be held (all were held at the respective charity's premises). Each organisation received a donation from NatCen for their help with setting up these groups and all participants received £20 as a thank you for taking part in the research and giving their time and thoughts.

The organisations NatCen worked with during phase one were:

- **Nacro:** dedicated to reducing crime. Nacro 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 two discussion groups in England, made up of ex-offenders and disadvantaged young people, some of whom were attending a drug recovery programme. A range of different experiences were represented within these groups, including homelessness, prison, care homes and unemployment.
- **HFT (the Home Farm Trust):** provides high quality support and care for people with learning disabilities and their families. Over 1,000 people in the UK are helped through supported living, registered care homes or via supported employment, domiciliary care or day services. NatCen ran a discussion group at one of HFT's residential centres with people with learning disabilities.
- **Depaul Trust:** works with some of the most disadvantaged young people in the UK. Depaul Trust not only provides the basic needs of food and shelter to homeless people, but also aims to tackle long-term and entrenched problems of social exclusion. NatCen ran a discussion group at a Depaul hostel with young people with experience of homelessness, who also had experience of being in care, drug use, unemployment and low wages.
- **Tomorrow's People:** aims to help break the cycle of unemployment by providing support and mentoring to unemployed people across the UK from specialist employment advisers, as well as working with employers to match people to the right jobs. A group of people using Tomorrow's People's services formed another discussion group. A broad range of people was represented here, with lots of different kinds of life experiences represented as well as unemployment.
- **Centrepoint:** the national charity working to improve the lives of socially excluded, homeless young people. As well as providing a range of accommodation-based services, on a short- and long-term basis, Centrepoint works to address people's

underlying problems. One of Centrepoint's hostels for young people was the venue for another discussion group, with a mixed group of young people taking part from a range of different black and minority ethnic groups, some of whom had experiences of living in different countries.

- **Elect:** a social enterprise based in east Liverpool. Elect provides a range of services: supporting new businesses and community enterprises as well as helping unemployed people back into work. Although Elect did not convene a group, they gave invaluable contacts for setting up a discussion group with people with experience of unemployment in their area.
- **Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB):** helps people across the UK resolve their legal, money and other problems. CAB provides free information and advice from over 3,000 locations, as well influencing policy-makers. A group of volunteer workers at CAB formed one discussion group. As well as their own experiences of unemployment, they were also able to draw on their work with CAB service users.
- **Vocal:** 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. The final group we held was organised by Vocal and consisted of a group of female carers: an older demographic than the other groups, with a wide range of life experiences.

In total, 60 people took part in the eight 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 charity, such as unemployment or homelessness, in reality participants' experiences spanned several categories. For example, there were unemployed ex-offenders

Table 1: Profile of participants

Group	
Learning difficulty	6
Ex-offender	17
People with experience of homelessness	7
Unemployed people	17
Care leavers	7
Carers	6
Gender	
Male	33
Female	27
Geographical location	
London	24
South-east	13
North-west	17
Scotland	6
Age	
16-18	11
19-24	10
25-35	14
36-50	18
51-60	4
61 and over	3
Ethnicity	
White	38
Black or black British	13
Asian or Asian British	1
Mixed	4
Other	4

and young care leavers with experience of homelessness. However, for ease of classification, they have been grouped in the sample profile according to the main focus of the organisation that recruited them.

Exploring participants' views of the social evils facing British society today was the key objective and each group began with an open discussion of their views about the term. Subsequently, a series of prompt cards was introduced, with a range of suggestions gathered from the web survey about what people saw as being social evils. Participants were asked to consider these suggestions: whether they agreed or disagreed with them and why and how they compared with ideas they themselves had put forward. Finally, the social evils originally identified by Joseph Rowntree were put to the groups, to see whether, and to what extent, participants saw these as being relevant today. Facilitators explored with the groups whether some social problems were seen as being worse than others, or whether there were some issues that could be grouped together.

The discussion groups were recorded and transcribed. NatCen's analysis then explored the key themes raised and discussed at each group. This was driven by three core questions:

- How did participants talk about and conceptualise social evils?
- Were there any demographic or regional differences according to the type of group convened?
- What were the top social evils discussed?

Talking about social evils

At the outset it was not clear how participants would respond to the term 'social evil'. During the discussion groups, reactions were mixed. In some groups, the term immediately resonated and discussion occurred immediately and spontaneously. In other groups, a suggested definition was required early on to stimulate discussion. The aptness of the term 'social evils' was debated, with some participants expressing the view that 'social ill' or 'social problem' was a less emotive phrase. However, in all cases, the subject (before or after definition) provoked lively discussion.

Overwhelmingly the issues most chewed over by participants and which emerged as being the top themes across the groups were thorny social problems, where there was perceived to be no obvious 'right' or 'wrong'. In contrast, some issues were seen as embodying absolute moral wrong and there was little or no debate because the clear consensus was that they were social evils. Examples of such issues included both criminal and exploitative acts, such as violence against women, sexual abuse of children and the prostitution of young girls. On the other hand, complex social phenomena such as teenage pregnancy and drug use generated considerable debate.

Analysis of the way people talked about 'social evils' led the researchers to reflect on how the term was conceptualised by participants. It was clear that people considered the issues from a number of different (but related) angles. Four themes emerged, which can be described as:

- Behaviours: what people do (e.g. *drugs, alcohol, yobbish behaviour*);
- Impact on different spheres of life: "It affects my ... (*home, family, community*)";

- Barriers to personal fulfilment: "I would like to do xxx with my life, but ..." (*poverty, prejudice and discrimination, caring responsibilities*);
- Who is to blame: responsible bodies (*government, the media*).

Not surprisingly, discussion of the term 'social evils' tended to kick off with issues of particular relevance to participants' lives. A mass of rich evidence was generated in the discussions about the ways in which social evils affected the lives of participants, many of whom were living with some of the issues discussed. However, when the prompt cards with suggestions from the web survey were introduced, discussions did range outside of people's personal experiences and participants gave their perspectives on a wider range of subjects. Then, as people were asked towards the end of the sessions to prioritise their 'top social evils', they tended to return to the issues that mattered most to them personally.

A range of characteristics and experiences appeared to influence the content and direction of discussions. The age of participants seemed to affect the breadth of discussion, with young people typically less inclined to dwell on issues beyond their immediate spheres of experience. This was most striking in the group of participants with learning difficulties, who found it very hard to look far beyond their own worlds and discuss more abstract concepts. Generally, discussion was influenced by participants' significant personal experiences of the social evils being discussed, whether due to their behaviour and lifestyle choices or because the communities in which they lived had been affected by the issues.

Stereotyping and labelling emerged as a big theme. Participants talked about how they had

been affected by people making assumptions about them. This was reflected in the group discussions by a reluctance to name individual *people* as social evils. For example, 'teenage parents' was one suggestion on a prompt card. Participants were quick to point out the complex social issues that often lay behind adolescent girls getting pregnant and were not willing to blame the girls. Also noticeable was the fact that, although drug misuse was a prominent theme, 'drug takers' were not generally named as being 'socially evil', with participants tending to focus more on 'drug dealers' or the wider drug trade as the social evil.

Identification of key themes

NatCen's core focus was finding out what participants saw as the key social evils facing British society today. During the course of the discussions, many different ideas were put forward and a number of dominant themes emerged, which are discussed below:

- Excessive use of drugs and alcohol;
- Decline of family;
- Decline of community;
- Crime and violence;
- Poverty as a constraint; and
- Immigration and unfairness.

The paper will then turn to the notion of truncated opportunities which was evident in the experiences and perceptions of participants and threads through and connects the key themes. Finally, the bodies or institutions seen as having influence over the issues discussed are explored.

Excessive use of drugs and alcohol

Across all groups, drugs and alcohol were raised at an early stage of discussion as being social evils, often coming up amongst the first few ideas put on the table. As discussions progressed, participants tended to revisit drugs and alcohol spontaneously by way of refining and clarifying their views.

A common view was that alcohol itself was not

necessarily a social evil. As a young man living in a hostel said: "Alcohol is not bad as long as you limit yourself." However, when used to excess it was seen as resulting in behaviours that were considered problematic, for example:

*It can cause a problem if people start kicking off and that in the streets.
(Young man with experience of homelessness).*

Binge drinking and the link with anti-social behaviour were commonly discussed, particularly in relation to young people and alcohol abuse.

Discussion of drugs differed. Personal experiences of misuse of drugs featured heavily in some of the discussion groups, particularly those made up of younger age groups and ex-offenders. Two of the groups included people who were on a substance misuse recovery programme, one for crack cocaine addiction. However, in other groups, notably those with carers, unemployed people and people with learning difficulties, drugs played a far less prominent role in participant's lives. Whilst all groups referred to drugs as a social evil, there was much more discussion amongst those more exposed to and affected by misuse of drugs. Interestingly, this illustrated how people talked about an issue which had played a big part in their lives, at the same time as being widely cited as a social evil. As with alcohol, drug use was not universally dismissed as a bad thing in itself. The positive medicinal properties of drugs were highlighted by some participants, whilst others made distinctions between different types of drugs and the extent of use.

However, one issue that participants were very clear about was the link between drug use and other social evils, particularly youth gangs, guns and violence. Rap artists were seen to be glamorising drugs and crime, making them seem like attractive options to disaffected young people. Lying behind these issues, the breakdown of family and community loomed

large, highlighting again the interconnectedness of so many of the social problems discussed, as expressed by this participant:

... if that kid's come from a broken home, there might be drugs or alcohol, the local community is involved in drugs ... it doesn't matter how good the education system is at that school, these people that live around this school affect how these children grow up.
(Man, attending drug recovery programme)

These views were borne out by the experiences of some of the young participants, many of whom had grown up in care. They described a sense of desolation about the barriers they saw as preventing them from getting ahead in their lives. Financial issues, the way society perceived them and a lack of family support linked strongly with the overarching theme of truncated opportunity. Taking drugs could be a welcome, if temporary, relief from these issues, as voiced by this young man:

... shall I continue feeling crap about myself or shall I take this drug and feel better for a while?
(Man, experience of unemployment)

The role of personal choice was recognised, with some talking about wanting to take drugs because they enjoyed them.

If I wanted to change my life I could've changed my life, but I didn't, right? I wanted to go down that path, right? I took drugs cos I liked drugs.
(Man, attending drug recovery programme)

However, some older participants highlighted the pernicious nature of drug-taking and the devastating effects drugs could have on people's lives: getting involved with crime, going to prison, being unable to find work or housing and the negative impact on family life.

Decline of family

Decline of family was a further theme on which a range of perspectives was put forward. Personal experience of family breakdown was widespread

across the sample. In particular, many of the young people taking part had grown up in care, an experience universally described as negative, as this exchange illustrates:

F: ... they'd just rather shove you in a kids' home and then keep shoving you round in every single kids' home they can find.

F: And it don't matter where you come from, if you're from Manchester, Blackpool, Scotland, wherever, they'll put you anywhere in the country.

M: So they don't care about your needs, it's just about filling a place ...

M: ... with me they put in me in a hostel and that was the last I heard of them.

Participants talked about having been beaten up by their parents, or feeling unloved and uncared for by them. Young people described periods of family disruption or violent family backgrounds as having been catalysts for 'going off the rails'.

The decline of family was not just raised in the context of those with personal experiences. Broader societal changes were interpreted in relation to their impact on family life, for example, single parent families with a working mother and an absent father, where young people are left alone and start getting into trouble. The 'rush, rush, rush' of modern life mentioned by participants, although not explicitly linked, created a strong suggestion of the knock-on impact this has on the time available to nurture a family.

Two of the prompt cards introduced to discussions listed 'teenage parents' and 'bad parenting', which provoked interesting responses. In relation to teenage parents, the link was often made between having a baby and getting council accommodation, but with a view that pregnancy could often be a way of escaping a bad situation. Bad parenting was not necessarily condemned and there was some sympathy for those labelled as bad parents. Participants acknowledged that people were often doing their best in difficult circumstances:

... some people raising children have no way of gauging *how* to raise a child. I mean they do the best they can, I wouldn't say that was a 'social evil'.

(Older black woman, unemployed)

Decline of community

Closely linked with the issue of family was that of community decline. The constraints of poverty, crime and violence were seen as being inter-woven with the decline of community. An overwhelming sense of the chaotic nature of the world 'out there' was expressed by participants. This was sometimes expressed in terms of physical isolation and fear, for example a lack of safety walking around neighbourhoods after dark or on weekend evenings.

'Ghettoisation' of inner-city areas, young people having nowhere to go and associated social problems (mentioned previously) were widely described. Participants talked about a lack of care, with people living next to each other not looking out for each other, as this unemployed woman commented: "We live in a culture of 'just look after yourself and sod everybody else.'"

Older people in particular talked about how different things used to be:

... the community spirit is broken down terribly over the last 20 or 30 years. I am nearly 50 years old. I can remember before. Society has changed, it is a lot more selfish and 'me, myself and I'. The emphasis is on success and making money whatever. It never used to be like that, people never used to be this selfish and greedy. And it all changed in the '80s, I think.

(Man, unemployed)

As these experiences illustrate, there was a strong sense amongst participants that the decline in community corresponded to a rise in selfishness. The widening gap between rich and poor and the huge issue of poverty (explored in more depth below) were often raised at this point: another illustration of the extent to which the themes were seen to be interconnected.

The lack of positive role models for children and young people to look up to also featured. Older participants reflected that there seemed to be an absence of good examples for young people to learn from and that instead the role models represented quite the opposite end of the spectrum, as this mother commented:

My son aspires to this stuff and that worries me, he's 15 and he watches all these gangster rappers and he's got the earrings and he goes, 'Oh they've got this crib and that and the next thing', and I'm like: 'That's not real life – get a grip!' So I think it can influence the younger ones.

(Female carer)

Participants also talked about the physical decline of communities, for example, the lack of facilities as youth clubs, adventure playgrounds and community centres have closed down.

Crime and violence

To a great extent, the issues of crime and violence cross-cut the three themes already discussed. There was, for example, a very strong link made between drugs and crime. Participants talked about this from personal experience, with many ex-offenders having become involved in criminal activity as a result of drug misuse. People living in inner-city areas talked about gangs of youths selling drugs in local communities, a proliferation of guns and a generally violent atmosphere on the streets. Parents voiced fears for their children. One male ex-offender talked about the allure of drugs for young people:

... they want to be somebody when they grow up. The only thing they can see around them who's got any money, who's probably doing anything is the drug dealers, you know, it escalates from there ... They don't see when a drug dealer's in jail and ten years down the line he's going to do it again. They don't see that, they just see he's on the street making money.

(Man, ex-offender)

Exploitation of young girls was also linked with drug abuse. Participants spoke about girls

getting hooked on drugs and then being sucked into a world of sexual exploitation and prostitution.

Violence against women was another issue introduced with the prompt cards. This was one of the themes which were universally perceived as an absolute 'wrong' and interestingly one that did not come up in discussion before being prompted. Child sexual abuse and exploitation was viewed in the same way.

A key aspect of the way experiences and perceptions of crime were articulated related to fear and stereotyping. Some participants spoke of a generalised anxiety about what lay 'out there', often raised when discussing youth gangs, anti-social behaviour, drugs and gun or knife crime. These fears could result in an unwillingness to go out at night, but the most palpable impact was a sense of unease felt by people about what might happen on the streets.

A lot of the concerns described did relate specifically to young people. What was very striking was the extent to which both sides of this 'story' were captured in the discussions. Young people talked about how their place in wider society felt uncomfortable. Many felt they were being stereotyped as problematic, a claim which was borne out by some of the comments from older participants, who expressed their – at times unfounded – fear of young people.

One woman described the following encounter on her way home:

I noticed there was a bunch of youths standing around and my immediate reaction was to stop and think 'Oh my goodness, shall I go the other way?' Until two seconds later I realised it was my own son and his friends. But that reaction was in me already.
(Older woman, carer)

A young person described how she tried to help an older woman at a bus stop with her shopping, but the woman's reaction was to exclaim: "Get your hands off my bag!". Both

young people and older participants gave witness to the existence of stereotypes, as this young black man described:

They just, they're stereotyping young kids now as all being little yobs ... There are a lot of jobs out there, but not everyone who just wears tracksuit bottoms and stuff like that.
(Man, attending drug recovery programme)

Prejudice and discrimination were roundly condemned during discussions as being social evils. People saw racism as a bad thing, and did not think that individuals should be discriminated against because of their religion or race. However, what can be seen lying behind the stereotypes described above *are* some elements of prejudice and discrimination, coming from a feeling of fear. In other words, there was some difference between what participants said they believed to be wrong (such as discriminating against groups of people), and what they actually felt when faced with a particular situation (fear of a group of young people in hoods).

Poverty

Poverty was repeatedly discussed in the groups, but the focus was not on specific items that people could not afford. Rather the issue of poverty was expressed as a constraining force that prevented people from achieving their aspirations of living a good life, again linking with the theme of truncated opportunities.

... if you're poor, you're struggling all the time – you have no choices in life. That's what poverty does to you, it gives you no choice.
(Older woman, carer)

There was a definite sense of poverty feeling like a trap from which it was very hard to escape. Young people talked of struggling to achieve their goals of education, training and employment in the face of pinching financial constraints.

Polarisation of society into the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', as a result of the widening gap between rich and poor, was another prominent

theme. It was recognised that while those people making money and doing well would welcome these changes, there was a whole swathe of people not benefiting. One unemployed man described the impact of this:

... you have to get the job and be a success. That may work for a lot of people but not for all, some people become disenfranchised and become marginalised and just fall through the gap. That happens to a lot of people.
(Man, unemployed)

However, whilst some participants expressed a sense of disillusionment and hopelessness, others talked about personal responsibility for getting ahead in life, summed up by this young black man:

Why, why are people rich? They obviously did something to get rich, so ... when people say they're poor, well, why are you poor? Obviously they haven't got a higher ambition.
(Man, experience of homelessness)

Poverty was seen as closely related to the other themes. Participants could see that in a deprived community making money from drug dealing could seem an appealing option to young people, particularly where they saw their parents struggling financially. It was also striking that the young people in the sample had all been affected by family breakdown in some way. Although not explicitly asked about their families, the strong impression given was that they were on their own, and many of the struggles they described related to their efforts to make their way in the world alone.

Immigration

Immigration was another recurrent theme. Again, this was not voiced as a social evil itself, but related to perceived mismanagement by government and the unfairness that could result from this. One of the key drivers underpinning this theme was a perceived sense of unfairness about the way that refugees and asylum-seekers were treated in comparison with people born in the UK, such as with regard to housing

or jobs. This could be viewed as the result of a situation where a number of needy groups are competing for limited resources:

They're taking [it] off the people that need it here.
(Young woman, ex-offender)

Why bring over more and more people when you can't sort the problems you got?
(Young man with experience of homelessness)

In this way, the social evil referred to the systems in place for dealing with those in social need, rather than being directed at the individual people seeking asylum or refuge. At least, this was how it was presented in discussion.

However, there was also a view that the help being provided by this country was not appreciated, as this participant describes:

I have been through really bad states as well. What I get, I really appreciate it. But then I see people just come over here and they get it just handed to them on a plate and they don't appreciate it, I don't understand.
(Young black woman, unemployed)

It should be noted that the distinction between people coming to this country seeking refuge or asylum or the many different groups of people arriving to work – so-called 'economic migrants' – was not explicitly made. However, from the way people talked about the issues, it was possible to interpret which groups were being discussed.

Whilst the issues above relate to refugees and asylum-seekers, further issues referred more broadly to all types of people coming into this country, and to economic migrants.

The second issue raised in relation to immigration was about the perceived lack of control over who is coming into the country. Participants felt that government failed to stop criminals and even terrorists entering the UK. In

other words, it was the way some people coming into this country were handled and managed, rather than immigration itself, that was seen as being a social evil. One young woman commented: “I’m not racist, it’s not their fault, it’s just the government.” This relates to the issue of who is to blame for some of the social evils discussed, which is explored in the next section.

Finally, when groups turned to the wider issue of immigration, a number of different factors emerged. First, there was recognition of market place dynamics in relation to what jobs were available and who was willing to do them. People talked about immigrant workers coming to the UK, prepared to work for less money and to do the unpopular jobs. Second, it was acknowledged that immigrant workers have long been a feature of British society, going back to the days when people were invited here to work from former colonies. Third, the resultant benefits to the wider economy were acknowledged.

Truncated opportunities

One of the very striking findings was the extent to which the top social evils discussed were interconnected. The links between these themes were explicitly expressed by participants, who talked about the connections between the social evils they saw in day-to-day life around them. For example, an issue such as misuse of drugs and alcohol was discussed in the context of crime and limited opportunities for young people, which was in turn seen as being linked to a breakdown of family and community, and so on.

Detailed exploration of these interweaving social evils revealed a central underlying theme – the idea of truncated opportunities. The people we talked to were living in, amongst and through a range of very challenging social problems, which were affecting their lives to a greater or lesser extent. The impact of these experiences left people feeling unable to fulfil their potential because of the limited nature of choices and opportunities available to them. This view was

expressed in relation to the past and the future; if you consider ‘opportunity’ as the ability to change tomorrow, for many participants this seemed an unattainable goal.

Education is a key aspect of the idea of truncated opportunities. It was recognised by participants as representing a possible escape route from the social evils being discussed. For example, older participants talked about how they had missed out on the educational opportunities offered to them and were keen to pass on to the younger generation the importance of getting a good education, as this participant described:

I’ve got three kids ... going to school is more important than anything else. The other parents, there are kids hanging out on the streets, I don’t allow my kids to do that, they’re in by six o’clock, you know, I’m trying to show them the right way.
(Black man, unemployed)

A series of barriers to education were suggested. Young participants who were still studying talked about the difficulties they faced trying to support themselves financially without any support from family, as this young man reflected when talking about going to university:

... they ask us for an amount of money ... that we can’t afford to pay. And then because of that maybe, it can stop our future.
(Man, experience of homelessness)

The availability of some help and support was recognised, with Educational Maintenance Allowance cited as an important source of support during college. However, persuading young people of the benefits of education versus the attractions of other lifestyles open to them (crime, gangs, drugs etc.), was seen as a challenge. An absence of positive role models was mentioned several times, as described in the section on community decline.

Whilst the sense of facing truncated opportunities in the future was articulated by young people, older participants described the

phenomenon with hindsight, their opportunities and choices having been affected both by broad social change as well as their own life events and circumstances. While individuals were rarely mentioned in discussion, Margaret Thatcher was the key exception. The Thatcher era was perceived as marking a shift towards a greater individualism in society and contributing to a growth of selfishness, the fragmentation of family and the loss of community. This was a time when loss of opportunity had become entrenched for some participants.

More immediately connected to individual lives, though still implicitly linked to such changes, was the impact of having to care for sick or disabled relatives and the resulting narrowing of opportunities. A further limiting factor was an overwhelming sense of the multiple demands, and the changing pace of modern life: “the amount of things you have to pack in, you’re like a hamster in a wheel and it’s really hard to get off and keep things going.” The idea of truncated opportunities is thus both complex and multi-faceted. This theme is revisited in the conclusion.

Who or what influences social evils?

As previously indicated, participants’ focus perhaps inevitably turned to the issue of whether someone or something could be identified as being to blame for the social evils being discussed, either through action or lack of action. Most commonly cited were the media and government, but big business and religion were also suggested. While often referred to as social evils, closer analysis revealed that their role and importance in the debate related to their influence over social evils. This was described in the following ways:

- perceived manipulation of public opinion (the media);
- inadequate or inappropriate help to address the problems of social evils (the government, religious institutions);
- perpetration of a capitalist society resulting in selfishness and breakdown of community (government and big business).

The media

Discussion of the media’s role in relation to social evils centred on its perceived responsibility for compounding people’s fears, through a biased portrayal of society. This related to two areas in particular: current affairs and popular culture.

In terms of news, participants felt that the media could be alarmist in its approach, with a tendency to sensationalise and manipulate issues in order to provoke a public reaction and create an appetite for their stories. There was agreement that certain parts of the media (with some newspapers named) were particularly guilty of doing this. Specific issues were seen to have received particular ‘spin’ in the media, with the portrayal of Muslims since the events of September 11th highlighted as an example of this.

In relation to popular culture, there was a view that violence was glamorised, with rap stars often referred to as examples of this, as well as the ubiquity and popularity of violent movies, video games and even movie characters like James Bond. The promotion of unhealthy or undesirable behaviours was also discussed, for example, the impact of ‘size zero’ on women’s body image. The widespread use of swearing was criticised, especially where it was seen as being condoned, such as with Gordon Ramsay. Participants were particularly concerned about the way that these were portrayed as things to aspire to, especially in relation to their influence on young people.

Government

A common view was that the government was the overarching social evil, seen to have a connection to many of the key issues discussed. The nature of discussion about government at first suggested that participants wanted to be able to ‘blame’ someone or something for the social problems that were raised, and the easiest and most obvious target seemed to be the government. However, it was clear when it came to analysing the data that it was the relationship between the government and the social evils

discussed that participants were critical of. One aspect of this was that some felt the government to be totally out of touch with the issues facing 'ordinary' people. This created a sense of frustration and hopelessness, because without those in charge understanding what the problems were, it seemed unlikely that they would be dealt with satisfactorily.

*They're proposing solutions to problems they haven't got a clue about.
(Man, ex-offender)*

The other aspect was that government mechanisms for tackling social problems were not felt to be working properly. For example, the prison system was seen to be failing. Little effective rehabilitation and the prevalence of drugs in many prisons meant that people were coming out with the same or even worse problems than they went in with. The perceived lack of control over immigration was another area of government performance criticised as inadequate. Criticism was also directed at the government for financial hardships experienced by young people who were trying to get an education and support themselves at the same time. One example given was paying for travel:

*We're trying to get something out of what we're going to do, in either work or education, and we're just basically spending our money on getting there.
(Young man, living in hostel)*

Many of the discussions of different social evils ended with criticism of the government for not doing enough to deal with the issues.

Religion

The issue of religion came up in a variety of contexts. Although religious faith was not viewed as being a social evil, the ways in which religion was organised and practised were felt to be problematic. In particular, religious extremism was seen to be a big problem facing the modern world. Although religion was seen to have been a cause of war and conflict over the course of history, today's link between religion

and terrorism was perceived as a new and particularly deadly threat.

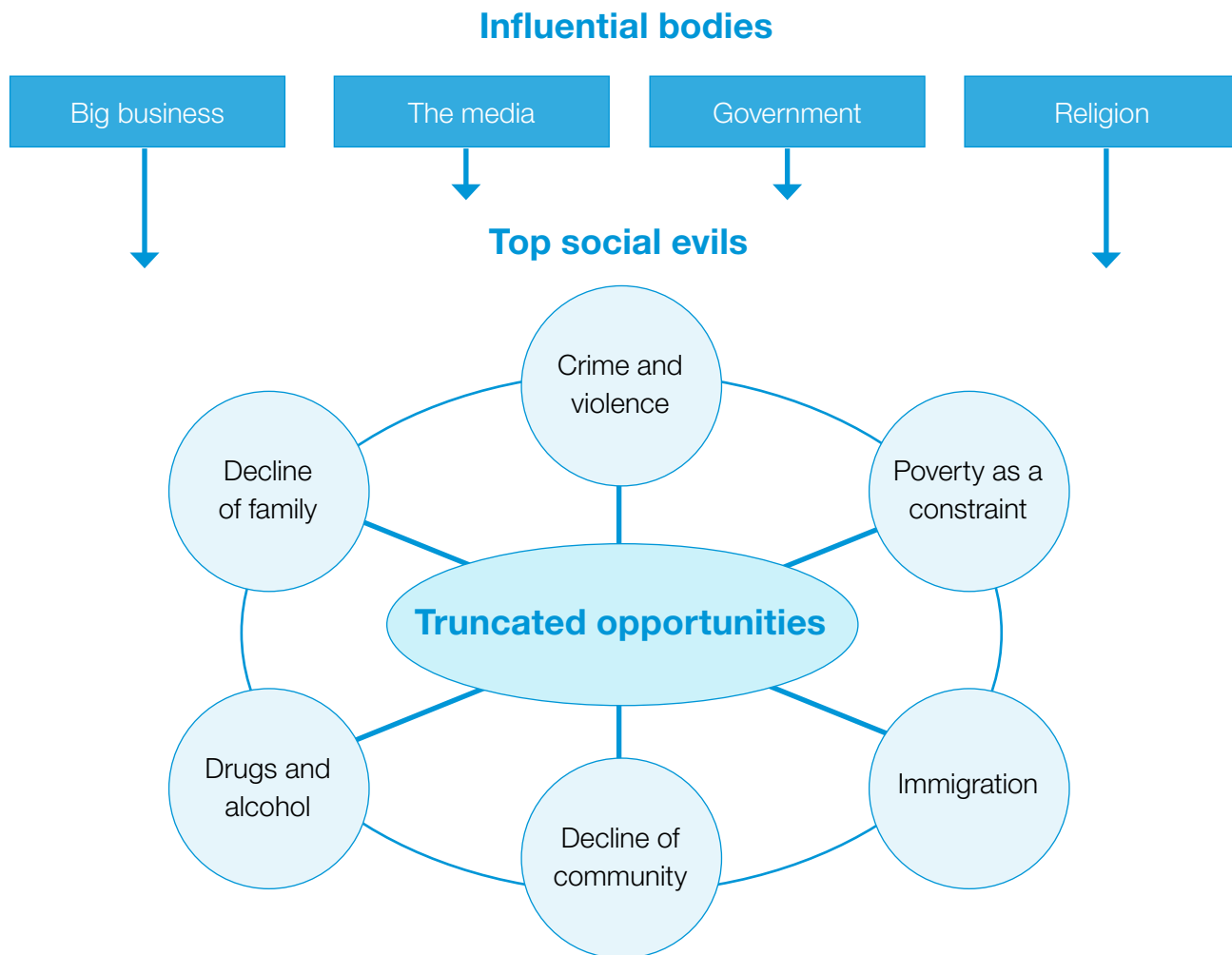
Against this background, some participants described an absence of religious guidance in relation to the challenges faced by contemporary society. It was felt that religious leaders across faiths should provide some moral leadership, but that this was not happening.

Big business

Big business was the fourth influential set of institutions identified. Large corporate businesses were often discussed in relation to the widening gap between rich and poor, and poverty more generally. They were seen to be a key driver of the capitalist society we live in today, in turn repeatedly linked to increased levels of selfishness, with people looking out for themselves and those doing well leaving an underclass of dispossessed and disenfranchised people. For example, the arrival of a big supermarket in an area was seen to mark the end for small local businesses, resulting in money going into the pockets of rich businessmen and away from the local community.

The relationship between the key themes, the notion of truncated opportunities and the influential bodies is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Summary diagram of social evils, truncated opportunities and influential bodies.



Among the sixty people who took part in these discussion groups, a huge level of diversity was captured. Participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and brought very different life experiences to the process. This enabled the researchers to tap into a wealth of perspectives that might otherwise not have been captured in the JRF's social evils programme.

Having sought out the voices of these particular groups, one of the key findings relates to participants' proximity to social evil. Threading through the findings there is a shared story of 'truncated opportunities', of chances curtailed, lost and wasted. This story straddles generations and stretches ahead into the future as well as back into the past. It illustrates the ways in which social evil can impede aspiration as well as opportunity. And it conveys an overwhelming sense of constraint, with limited escape routes and little social mobility.

Social evils and the influential bodies around them have had a profound effect on people's lives and this is evident in the stories told by participants. The resultant loss of opportunities and entrenched exclusion underline the importance of ensuring that such voices are heard in this debate. Blame (of institutions rather than individuals) is by no means absent from participants' stories, particularly for the apparent expendability of opportunity. But there is a pronounced sense of personal responsibility too, for what has happened and what could still happen in the future. People want to overcome social evil. How they might do so is something which phase two of the programme will provide a fascinating opportunity to explore.

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Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Website: www.jrf.org.uk



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Please contact:
Communications Department
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Tel: 01904 615905
Email: info@jrf.org.uk

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