

# Why are fear and distrust spiralling in twenty-first century Britain?

**Viewpoint**  
Informing debate

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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'. Anna Minton argues that the cause of growing fear and distrust is visible physical inequality and segregation in the environment, combined with a commercially driven media with a vested interest in promoting fear.

## Key points

- While crime has been falling steadily since 1995, the majority of Britons think it is rising. Liverpool is a classic example of a place where fear of crime rather than crime itself is the problem.
- The evidence from around the world and from different historical periods shows that increasing levels of fear are the consequence of growing visible physical inequality and segregation in the environment.
- International research has indicated links between higher levels of trust and better mental health in more equal societies, and greater levels of fear, distrust and poor mental health in societies with large wealth gaps.
- The media, underpinned by commercial needs, has a very significant role to play in heightening the climate of fear, because stories which sell fear also sell newspapers.
- Fear and distrust are linked, with research showing that levels of trust correlate with fear in society.
- Increasingly stark segregation fuels a human tendency to surround oneself only with groups similar to oneself and perceive those who are different as dangerous.
- Celebrity culture brings with it the artificial impression that we know people when we don't and encourages the misplaced pursuit of perfection, part of a drive for perfect control which is unattainable.
- Policy approaches tackle symptoms rather than causes, by focusing instead on higher security and punitive zero tolerance. This fails to lower crime and fails to reassure people, actually making them more scared and fuelling the cycle of fear further.
- Small shifts in policy direction can make a difference to inequality. An awareness of the importance of 'social disparagement' might influence policy-makers towards approaches which undermine fear and promote trust.
- If there is to be any chance of improving levels of trust between institutions and the public, the public service remit of media agencies (such as the BBC) needs to be properly supported and extended.

### Author

Anna Minton, writer and journalist.

# Introduction

People react to fear, not love. They don't teach that in Sunday School but it's true.

Richard Nixon

It is about relationships. It is about emotional security. It is about love.

David Cameron

Why do people believe crime is going up when it is going down? Why are levels of trust between people in Britain among the lowest in the world? And why is happiness so much lower and rates of mental illness so much higher than in the rest of Europe?

This *Viewpoint* will attempt to answer these questions by outlining the reasons behind rising fear and distrust in Britain, which is reflected by the paradox that while crime has been falling steadily since 1995 the majority of Britons think it is rising – a trend which is paralleled in the United States. It will show how policy approaches deliberately sidestep the real causes of fear and make the situation worse. The evidence from around the world and for different historical periods shows beyond doubt that increasing levels of fear are the consequence of growing visible physical inequality and segregation in the environment and between people. But policy-makers deem these problems too complex and focus instead on higher security and American approaches which favour zero tolerance. The *Viewpoint* argues that this fails to lower crime and fails to reassure people, actually making them more scared and fuelling the cycle of fear further.

Monica is a good example of someone who found that too much security had a paradoxical effect. When she moved into a gated community after living on an ordinary terraced street for 20 years, she expected that the higher security would make her feel safer. But recently she had an unexpected experience, when one night the electronically controlled gates surrounding her development went wrong and had to be propped open. As a result she spent the whole night lying awake and was far more scared than she had ever been in her terraced house, despite the more than adequate locks on the front door.

Monica lives in a relatively affluent part of London. Hundreds of miles away in a very different part of Britain, higher security is also creating an atmosphere of increased fear. In the part of Salford designated a 'Respect Action Area' by the government, teenage boys are stopped and searched by police at least once or twice a week. Curtis, who is 16, and Scott, who is 17, explained this routine occurrence makes them feel "bullied" and "belittled", revealing that ironically 'respect' in this context is closer to humiliation. Extending this approach, the police now have the right to stop and search anyone, without the usual requirement of reasonable suspicion, in ten boroughs across London.

The media, which is underpinned by commercial needs rather than a drive to inform, has a very significant role to play in heightening the climate of fear because stories which sell fear also sell newspapers. The interaction between the media and policy-making is also critical because as newspapers ramp up fear, more and more policy is made in response to headlines rather than rigorous research, which takes time and resources and yields complex rather than straightforward headline-grabbing results. In turn, these ill-thought-out and short-term responses are 'spun' to generate the headlines the government wants.

But people are increasingly fed up with spin, which is breaking the tie between citizens and politics, and increasing distrust. The government often accuse the public of apathy and talk of the 'disconnect' between people and politics. The problem is not apathy or lack of interest but lack of trust, with the public distrustful and disbelieving about the policies being put in place. Fear and distrust are linked, with research showing that levels of trust correlate with fear in society,<sup>1</sup> but they are not the same and will be examined separately. For example, distrust of spin is not the same as fear of crime, although there is a connection which is based on the loss of trust in the institutions which govern the country.

This *Viewpoint* will take a critical look at why fear and distrust are increasing and the policies promoted to make people feel safer and happier. These policies, which tackle symptoms rather than causes, mesh with the spin culture, selling us misplaced solutions to rising anxiety which rest on authority and control, which only make things worse. As for the real causes of fear and distrust, they are swept under the carpet, where they multiply rather than go away.

## Inequality and segregation

From the Second World War to the present day a large body of evidence has made it clear that levels of inequality in societies are linked to distrust – and therefore fear – between people. It is well-known that the Second World War was a period of high social cohesion, stereotyped by the 'Blitz spirit'. Less well-known is that, despite the deprivations of war, many important health indicators showed improvement and in some cases 'astonishing improvement'.<sup>2</sup> To the great surprise of the nation's psychiatrists, who were anticipating widespread psychological problems as a result of bombing, this improvement included mental health. This cannot be put down simply to the cohesive effect of facing a common enemy, although that undoubtedly played a part. For sociologist Richard Titmuss, one conclusion was that the universal availability of services meant 'less social disparagement' and that the policies actively promoted to reduce inequality, from free school milk to pensions, were responsible. 'Less social disparagement' is interchangeable with higher self-worth and self-esteem – respect in other words – and promotes trust between people.

More recently, a wealth of international research has echoed the links between higher levels of trust and better mental health in more equal societies, contrasting with greater levels of fear, distrust and poor mental health in societies with large wealth gaps. Most notably, economist Richard Layard's work brought to wide attention the direct correlation between levels of trust, happiness and depression. In his book *Happiness* he cited the World Values Survey, which found that Norway, one of the most equal societies in the world, has the highest levels of trust, while Brazil, which has enormous wealth inequalities, has the lowest.

Yet, despite the weight of evidence there is a feeling among the political and media elite that any discussion of inequality is somehow old news, reminiscent of the 1980s and the divisions of Thatcher's Britain. New Labour seized control of this narrative and moved the story on, famously relaxed about the rich getting richer and set against higher direct taxation, while also claiming their policies could alleviate poverty. They failed to do that, but while the bottom 20 per cent have got poorer the overwhelming majority are materially better off, making it easier to overlook. Today, despite the Conservatives' recent discovery of the 'broken society', poverty and inequality do not seem to have the relevance they had even 20 years ago. Instead the need to alleviate poverty has been replaced by an emphasis on punitive zero tolerance approaches in poor areas. But, however unfashionable a topic it may be, a key argument of this paper is that the way inequality is reflected in the physical environment underpins today's growing culture of fear.

This is clearest of all in Liverpool, a city which has been much in the news over the last year following the shooting of eleven-year-old Rhys Jones. His tragic death dominated the headlines and both contributes to and fits in with the existing perception that Liverpool is a high-crime area, a perception which became iconic in the national consciousness with the murder of two-year-old James Bulger, captured on CCTV before his death in 1993.

Except Liverpool is not a high-crime city, with crime figures significantly lower than in Leeds and Manchester which are of comparable size.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, while people believe Merseyside is the highest crime spot in the North West, it is actually the second lowest. So it is a classic example of a place where fear of crime rather than crime itself is the problem. But although it is not a high-crime city it includes some of the poorest parts of England, ranking as the most deprived city according to the Index for Multiple Deprivation 2007.<sup>4</sup>

Liverpool is also one of the most segregated and security-conscious places in the country, with one of the largest CCTV networks in Britain, with even the black cabs in this city notifying passengers that CCTV is operating inside the taxi. In the city centre the newly privatised shopping area employs uniformed private guards known as 'quartermasters' and 'sheriffs' to police the streets, and enforces restrictive policies on who may or may not enter the area and what they can and cannot do there. Begging, selling the *Big Issue*, rollerblading, skateboarding and political demonstrations are banned, and even taking a photograph or eating a sandwich is not allowed except in designated areas. That's in the city centre, which has been reconstructed as a tightly controlled high-end shopping centre. In contrast, in outlying parts of Liverpool, drones, which are the unmanned spy planes used in Iraq, are used to patrol deprived parts of the city.

The segregation of these enclaves, from the privatised centre of Liverpool to the deprived parts of the city policed by drones, is behind this fear of crime which does not correlate with the reality of crime statistics. What is happening here defies the Thatcherite notion of 'trickledown' which continues to determine economic policy – that wealth created will trickle down to those who need it the most. Instead, people from the heavily policed, outlying areas of Liverpool are clear that the new wealth of the privatised centre is not for them and feel unfairly targeted by the drones, dispersal orders and heavy CCTV presence.

Liverpool is an especially clear example of these trends but very similar newly privatised city centres, which aim to make the maximum profit out of places, making only those with money to spend feel welcome, are springing up all over the country. Heavily policed by highly visible and uniformed private security, they aim above all to create a safe environment, which caters only for shoppers. The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre predicted this shopping mall sterility more than 30 years ago when he warned that treating place purely as a product would mean that everywhere would look the same. The consequence is also that all those with insufficient money to spend, from groups of young people who are seen as threatening, to older people and marginal groups, are excluded.

In these strangely similar environments not only the homeless but the young and the old and anyone who just likes to wander around, lingering outside shop windows, is moved on by security guards, because while there are plenty of outdoor cafes for people to sit in, they require the purchase of an expensive latte. So groups of young people who are not there to shop are dispersed while the old increasingly do not find themselves welcome, alienated by simple features such as the lack of public conveniences and benches with backs on them to sit and watch the world go by. Anyone who looks too different becomes strange and to be feared, while the lack of intergenerational mixing deprives people of the experience of each other which in itself breaks down barriers.

Invariably, not a mile or two away are enclaves of poverty which are entirely disconnected from these privatised and sterile engines of wealth creation. Margaret, a hairdresser I spoke to, who lives on the Isle of Dogs in London's Docklands, described the situation perfectly. When I asked her if she ever used the shopping centre just down the road at Canary Wharf, she said: "I don't like going there. It always gives me the fear. I don't feel comfortable."

In Disraeli's famous polemic *Sybil*, written in 1845, he talks of "two nations", who are as "ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were dwellers in different time zones, or inhabitants of different planets". In many ways Britain today is closer to this picture than it was when Titmuss was writing, just after the Second World War.

## Fear of 'the other'

Increasingly stark segregation is damaging to people's psychological well-being because it fuels the human tendency to surround oneself only with groups similar to oneself, and perceive those who are different as dangerous, a duality frequently referred to by social scientists and psychoanalysts as fear of 'the other'.

When this fear of 'the other' – which can take in anybody who is different, from minority groups to poor people – is politically created, it can have horrifying results including genocide and ethnic cleansing. But its persistence in less extreme and more psychologically ordinary contexts is also important. This is identified in research from the United States, which shows that people who are visibly different are associated with crime even when there is no evidence to back that up. A study in Berkeley, California, found that there was a perception that the homeless people who congregated around a park were responsible for crime in the area. However, official figures confirmed that crime was no higher there than in the rest of the district, with the conclusion that it was the visible difference between the homeless and everybody else which was behind the misconception.<sup>5</sup>

As segregation and the homogenisation of places becomes more common, even small differences between people – in terms of clothes or hairstyle – can come to seem threatening. A particularly contemporary fear of 'the other' is the anxiety people feel when confronted by the growing number of women choosing to wear the burkha, who combine visible difference with an appearance which may seem threatening because of the associations which have been created with militant Islam. Many liberal Britons voice concern for the human rights of veiled women but the likelihood is that they are equally threatened by such a visible 'other'. Immigration similarly raises fears of 'the other' and has led Richard Layard to conclude that societies with lower rates of immigration are more cohesive.<sup>6</sup>

These are challenging debates for society, made superficially simple by the temptation to demonise ‘the other’, which does nothing to solve the problem. For example, rather than taking a long-term approach to working with the homeless, new policies simply ban them from large parts of the city, displacing them to other areas where the perception – often wrongly – is that crime is high. Meanwhile, a whole host of other people and activities – from skateboarders to political activists – are banned from the new privately-policed centres in the process, while a more covert exclusion prohibits diversity by creating an environment which does not make many groups of people feel welcome.

Ironically the only people in this environment who do look visibly different are the private security guards who are there to create an atmosphere of safety but, counter-intuitively, it is the actual presence of the guards and the high security paraphernalia that comes with them that contributes to the feeling of sterility and fear. After all, as Monica’s experience showed, if people are surrounded by heavy security to protect them, the feeling grows that there must be something to fear. In contrast, the ‘light touch’ presence of public police is shown to promote feelings of safety.

Economic determinists argue that, like the growth of the super-rich, increasing homelessness, religious fundamentalism and migration are globalised trends which society can do little about, other than to free up restrictions on trade and labour hence promoting migration, while discussions of ‘the other’ are for academics rather than politicians.

However, it is surprising just how important a role small policy changes can play in creating environments which are, or are not, welcoming to strangers. Unfortunately, rather than trying to tackle this challenge, policy-makers have fallen into the trap of demonising ‘the other’. Both the telling and selling of news and the creation of defended space outlined in the next sections illustrate how this happens.

## Narratives: Telling and selling the story

“Boy stabbed but crime falls” is not a captivating headline, whereas “Enough: Children killing children” is compelling. This was the headline for *The Evening Standard*’s front page following the recent stabbing of a teenager. *The Sun* went with the almost identical “Kids killing kids. Families in fear. It’s time to say ... NO MORE”, alongside pictures of young people murdered in the last year. In the more upmarket *The Times*, the banner headline on the front page of the online edition was “Murder and beatings – knives out in Britain”, illustrated by a large image of a particularly grisly, scythe-like knife.

Knife crime in London is continuously in the news, with barely a week going by without a tragic story of another teenage stabbing in the capital. But a proper look at the statistics reveals a far more complicated picture closer to the forgettable reality – in news terms – that “knife crime is not rising”, which will never make a front page story. After the kind of press coverage witnessed recently few people would believe it either, but according to figures from the Metropolitan Police, knife crime in London has fallen significantly over the last couple of years, from 12,124 incidents (April 2006 to 2007), to 10,222 (April 2007 to 2008), while knife crime among young people between the ages of 10 and 19 also fell by more than 20 per cent between the end of 2006 and the end of 2007.

At the same time, within these clear findings, the number of teenage murder victims in London has shown a significant jump in the last year, from 17 in 2006 to 26 in 2007, with figures so far this year continuing the trend. But the most recent comprehensive review of knife crime, published by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies at the end of last year, found there had been a drop in the numbers of deaths involving knives, which was at its lowest level since 1994. The study also found there was no discernible increase in violence involving a knife but that there was some evidence of increased knife carrying among children and young people.<sup>7</sup> The real story, then, is complex and is dominated by an overall picture of falling knife crime, which needs to be set against an increase in teenage murders in specific instances.

But, for the visitor to London who relied on the newspapers for an impression of crime and fear in the city, or for an elderly person who rarely leaves the house and relies on increasingly lurid tabloid TV news to perceive the world outside, the notion that kids are killing kids on every London street would be understandable.

So the media should shoulder some responsibility for the widespread perception that crime is rising when it is falling. However, the context within which most news organisations operate ensures their primary concern, over and above informing the public, is to sell news and the truth is that people are drawn to fear and violence and enjoy this kind of story far more than complex tables of confusing crime statistics. The uncomfortable reality is that 'fear sells' and teenage murder is a 'good story' invoking human interest, tragedy, revenge and calls that 'something must be done'.

Once a story takes off, as knife crime has this year, it takes on its own momentum and the newsworthiness values by which similar incidents would otherwise be judged no longer apply. Suddenly knife crime among teenagers has huge currency and where, in previous years, a story involving a stabbing might not even make it into a newspaper, now it is guaranteed to be front page news. But although knife crime was at the top of the political agenda at the time this *Viewpoint* was written, while each one is a tragedy the numbers affected remain statistically very low.

This type of narrative, which focuses on the horrifying story of a particular individual, rather than placing events in a context which addresses shortcomings in public policy, was identified by Barry Glassner in his book *The Culture of Fear* as the key reason behind the media's promotion of fear in the United States.<sup>8</sup> The ubiquity of this type of story in the media doesn't rest on a conspiracy theory but is down to the fact that these stories help sell papers in a difficult commercial environment, which is as true for news as for the raft of security products which are sold with their own fear-based messages, looked at in the next section.

These compelling stories, which hinge on fear, are also very popular with contemporary British and American politicians who welcome the opportunity to appear 'tough on crime'. When Jack Straw was Home Secretary, he pre-empted the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'social evils' consultation by announcing in a speech that "fear of crime" has become a contemporary "evil" on a par with the "five [giant] evils" of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness which Beveridge vowed to tackle after the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, although he did briefly acknowledge that crime had fallen, Straw put the need to address fear of crime at the centre of a new drive to build a safer society, which he said would be based on the biggest ever investment in CCTV and the introduction of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), two policies which were based on scant research evidence.

Today, research is emerging showing that both CCTV and ASBOs do not work but the same interaction between the media and politicians continues. Politicians respond to the headlines on knife crime with calls for curfews and increased stop-and-search powers for police, although evidence dismisses these approaches, with the recent review of knife crime finding that the extension of police stop-and-search powers is "a problematic response", with "huge potential to create resentment". This conclusion was based on the Home Office's own research, but rather than responding to the evidence, Home Office Minister Tony McNulty dismissed the same criticisms from the Children's Commissioner that stop-and-search powers would antagonise young people. Instead he said: "He [the Commissioner] is plumb wrong and miles away from where the public are."<sup>10</sup> So evidence-based research is ignored and policy is made on the basis of what is most likely to please a public misinformed by a media which is actively fuelling the culture of fear. The result is that the opportunity to develop specific, targeted policies towards the spike in youth murders is missed.

## Defensible space and security

The visible segregation and excessive security which increases fear and distrust can be seen as a physical reflection of growing wealth inequalities, evidenced by the fact that high-security living in gated compounds has spread fastest in societies like the United States, South Africa and Russia where inequality is particularly pronounced.

But in Britain this is only part of the picture. Far more important is the attitude of policy-makers, developers and the insurance and security industries to a design term called 'defensible space', coined by an American town planner called Oscar Newman in the early 1970s. Newman's main principle was based on 'territoriality', which he said creates space which defends itself, by marking out boundaries clearly and encouraging residents to control a place so that strangers are discouraged from entering, to create a safe environment.<sup>11</sup>

This idea of 'designing out crime' and addressing social problems by controlling the environment, rather than improving social conditions, overlaps with zero tolerance approaches and has proved very popular with American and British politicians. Consequently, although he is little-known outside planning and design circles, Newman has determined the design of British housing since the 1970s, after local authorities adopted his principles in their design guides, favouring cul-de-sacs with only one point of entry rather than the traditional street pattern. However, 'defensible space' remains controversial, with the debate centring on the question of whether 'natural surveillance' which deters crime is better created by the 'eyes on the street' of strangers, as argued by Jane Jacobs in her seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*,<sup>12</sup> or whether strangers should be seen as dangerous intruders as Newman's ideas suggested.

Backed by a police design initiative called 'Secured by Design', the principles behind 'defensible space' determine the security-conscious look and feel of nearly all new development today, from the large privatised city centres to new housing. The consequences can be in the creation of bizarre environments with isolated, often empty enclaves which promote fear, rather than the safety and reassurance which comes in busy places where people are free to wander around and come and go. A housing scheme I visited which has won a 'Secured by Design' award illustrates this perfectly: the winning features included small windows, a reinforced steel door with a full-size gate in front of it and a grey aluminium roof which had a military feel to it. While it ticked all the requisite boxes, it also looked frightening.

The widespread use of 'defensible space' and 'Secured by Design' principles ties in with what American commentators describe as the 'FIRE economy' – an acronym for Finance, Insurance and Real Estate – with developers and the security and insurance industries very keen to build in this way.<sup>13</sup> Because developers can fit more houses onto a plot built out as a cul-de-sac or gated complex, it is more profitable than the traditional street pattern. This is why, despite encouragement from the government to return to streets, this type of development is the main type on the market. The insurance and security industries are fully behind it too as security products which tally with 'Secured by Design' guidelines carry lower insurance premiums.

So the result is that nearly all new development follows this high security, enclave pattern which entrenches segregation. Yet these types of houses and places are not actively sought out by people; it's more that it's virtually all there is on offer. Monica provides just such an example, telling me that when she was looking for a new house she hadn't even thought of living in a gated development and when she saw the place it was the house she liked rather than the gates and security. But when she was offered the extra security she believed it could only be a "bonus", which fits in with the contemporary narrative towards security, that as it is there to make us feel safer than that is surely what it will do.

Today, although there is neither the enormous popular demand nor the need for excessively high security, the security industry is one of the fastest growing and most successful industries of recent years, boosted by a combination of factors including legislation, the spread of privately owned and privately controlled parts of the city, and the security-conscious approach to housing design which comes with defensible space. It goes without saying that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and July 2005 in London have hugely amplified concerns about security, particularly in public places. Despite this, mounting evidence shows that private security and CCTV does not reduce fear of crime or actual crime and might in fact increase crime. According to a study funded by the Scottish Office in Glasgow, there was no improvement in feelings of safety after CCTV was introduced, while the area studied actually showed an increase in crime. The author concluded that the 'electronic eye on the street' threatens to erode the 'natural surveillance' of 'mutual policing' by individuals and represents a retreat from 'collective and individual responsibility to self interest and a culture of fear.'<sup>14</sup>

The growing reliance on technological systems which seem to offer greater control over the environment also brings a predictability, which offers a false reassurance. One example of this is the lack of spontaneity which comes with the use of satellite navigation systems, which means we are less likely to get lost but when we do we are less able to cope with it, having given up personal responsibility for where we are. Similarly, Monica's experience of living behind gates meant that when they went wrong she no longer felt safe, although she'd spent 20 years on an ordinary street feeling entirely comfortable.

The reduction in spontaneous interaction is mirrored by a growing fear of intruders. These days if a friend is in the area they will rarely pop in unannounced but will ring in advance on their mobile, and when the phone rings their name will come up on the screen, removing even that element of surprise. But because I sometimes work from home my doorbell does ring unexpectedly from time to time and, although it is invariably a telecoms company claiming to offer me a better deal, it can feel intrusive and possibly threatening, which is a shame as there is never any reason to fear. This preoccupation with intruders has become an iconic contemporary fear, reflected by the huge coverage of an atypical murder on a Chelsea doorstep a few years ago, which saw City financier John Monckton stabbed to death.

The problem is that, although security innovations like gates and CCTV often offer false reassurances and do not create greater feelings of safety, people like them, which makes their introduction politically popular. The perfect fusion of this populist policy with tabloid TV is Channel Five's 'CCTV Cities', in which the journalist Donal McIntyre films CCTV control rooms around Britain as footage of drunken fights, police and paramedics streams in, creating the erroneous impression that it is the CCTV crime fighters who are putting the world to rights. As well as offering the illusion of control, that something is being done, CCTV is a cheaper solution than putting more police on the beat or conductors on the buses. Nonetheless, extensive research proves that it is 'light touch' policing and 'natural surveillance' rather than 'the electronic eye on the street' which really makes people feel safer. So once again evidence is cast aside in favour of populist policies which make the problem worse.

From CCTV to defensible space, the logic of security has become embedded in our culture, with the promise that security is there to make us feel safer so that is surely what it will do. Sadly this is wishful thinking, because dependence on too much security all too often has counter-intuitive consequences, creating more rather than less fear. As the Scottish Office research into CCTV concluded, it also decreases the ability of public space to be genuinely 'civilising' and 'civic'.

## Celebrity values

So far the argument in this *Viewpoint* has been that visible segregation and security promote fear, but where distrust is concerned treating every aspect of our lives as something to sell with a message to be spun is equally damaging. Today, people, places and institutions have become commodities in a way they never were before, which is changing the nature of the relationships between them and substituting the trust which flows from genuine communication, for distrust. At the same time, relationships between people are being substituted for artificial relationships with celebrities, who reflect a new value system based on fame and status for its own sake or for popular achievements, in sport or music, rather than the acquisition of knowledge or expertise.

The ongoing preoccupation with celebrity pulls together the media's treatment of news and well-known people as commodities which sell papers, with an identification on the part of the reader with personalities who reflect fame and status. It is escapist and arguably fun, with celebrities built up or knocked down by the press for being overweight, drunk or on drugs. But, while an identification with pop stars and footballers who live lives of unimagined riches may be diverting, bringing amusement and vicarious pleasure, they also breed a sense of worthlessness, representing a parallel universe to which millions of readers aspire but will never reach. For many respondents to the JRF's consultation, celebrities were seen as "extremely negative role models", promoting "unrealistic expectations" and "shallow aspirations".

Much as soap operas have long provided comforting, mythical places to take the place of long-gone communities of friendly neighbours, clustered around Albert Square or Coronation Street, the soap opera-like existence of celebrities, charted in minute detail by scores of magazines, bring daily involvement in the lives of Kate Moss and friends. Reality TV programmes fill a similar emotional space, creating the impression that the audience really knows the contestants, allowing them to become emotionally involved with them. These programmes are sometimes so popular they may even foster real relationships, providing 'water cooler' moments at work. But the fact that substituting artifice for real emotional engagement can be harmful is made clear by a helpline, which was advertised in *Heat* magazine, for people to ring who were suffering from depression following the end of a series of 'Big Brother'.

Celebrity culture brings with it the artificial impression that we know people when we don't, creating an emotional emptiness. It also encourages the misplaced pursuit of perfection, rather like the perfect goods which come off a production line and can be purchased if the consumer can afford it, which in an affluent society more and more people can, reflected by the growing popularity of plastic surgery to create the perfect appearance. This drive for perfection is linked to the popularity of control approaches to fear of crime, with people keen to be surrounded by as much security as possible in an attempt to feel perfectly safe.

Yet it doesn't work because it is not possible to create a perfect world, and no matter how much people have they always want more, because feelings of safety and self-esteem are emotional issues which cannot be addressed by consumer power. This contemporary greed was one of the key themes to emerge from the consultation, intertwined with the foremost social evil identified, which was the growth of individualism and the primacy of consumer goods, money and wealth over values rooted in community. As one respondent said, it "drives everything from greed and wasteful consumption to eating disorders and a preoccupation with celebrity. It is the darkest force within the modern collective psyche."

## Respect and happiness

Richard Titmuss pointed out more than half a century ago that 'less social disparagement' is central to greater cohesion, trust and happiness in society. Today the term 'disrespect' serves equally well for 'social disparagement', indicating just how important it is to foster a sense of self-worth and self-respect among people. Ironically, the government's 'Respect' agenda, which is based on zero tolerance policies pioneered in the United States, does exactly the opposite of this.

Zero tolerance, which like 'defensible space' aims for increased control over the environment rather than an understanding of social problems, emerged from the 'broken windows' theory, first outlined by James Wilson and George Kelling in a famous article in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1982.<sup>15</sup> In this they argued that tolerating minor routine incivilities, such as window breaking, begging and drunkenness, increases 'respectable fears' and encourages a spiral of community decline. This strategy – which brings with it another pleasing and easy to understand media narrative – was incorrectly credited with the clean-up of New York, with figures revealing that during the same period crime fell by similar amounts in comparable American cities which did not employ 'broken windows' policing. Despite this, the 'broken windows' approach is largely responsible for the arrival of 'anti-social behaviour' on the political scene – a policy buzzword created by New Labour in the mid- to late-1990s which criminalised the type of minor offences highlighted by 'broken windows' through new legislation towards anti-social behaviour.

Today, antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs) are increasingly seen as a failure, with their use dropping by more than a third and nearly two thirds of teenagers breaching them. One of the reasons ASBOs failed is that they came to be seen as a 'badge of honour' among offenders, which conferred a level of 'respect' from peers, indicating that policy-makers have got the issue disastrously the wrong way round. But despite this the policy approach lives on, in the shape of the 'Respect' agenda. This agenda is seeing a new lease of life in the enthusiasm expressed by both the main political parties for the roll-out of powers of 'stop and search' without reasonable suspicion, contradicting David Cameron's early interventions which expressed a desire to look at underlying causes. Titmuss found that questions of 'social disparagement' – respect and disrespect in other words – are critical for everyone and for young people in particular, yet policy-makers remain blind to it, and when highly regarded experts, such as the Children's Commissioner Al Aynsley Green, point this out their views are dismissed.

'Less social disparagement' is inextricably linked to greater equality and higher levels of trust, which in turn reduces fear between people. Fear of crime also causes depression, with research from University College, London, showing that people with a strong fear of crime were almost twice as likely to suffer from depression.<sup>16</sup> These links between fear, trust and unhappiness have been explored by both Richard Layard and psychologist Oliver James in their work on happiness and well-being. Layard points to far higher levels of trust and happiness in Scandinavian societies where wealth inequalities are far lower, while James cites figures showing that, at 22 per cent, rates of mental illness are twice as high in America, Australia and New Zealand, where wealth inequalities are greater, than in continental Europe.<sup>17</sup>

However, although this is one of the clearest messages to emerge from their work, the growing political interest in well-being has bypassed the question of inequality, concentrating on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy instead, which focuses on positive thinking as a means of easing depression. Growing mental health problems are an expensive burden for the UK, with the cost in lost employment estimated at £26.1 billion according to research from the King's Fund. As there is considerable evidence that this type of therapy does reduce depression in the short term, the government has been persuaded to fund the training of thousands of Cognitive Behaviour Therapists.

Although Cognitive Behaviour Therapy might seem a world away from zero tolerance and certainly aims to promote self-esteem rather than humiliation, there are similarities as it focuses on symptoms rather than causes. If the evidence from America, Britain and continental Europe is that growing inequality is behind higher rates of mental illness then it is unlikely to prove a successful strategy towards mental health. Arguably, it directs sufferers away from the real causes of their dissatisfaction, which, as the experience of the Second World War indicates, often lie with feelings of 'social disparagement'.

## Conclusion

It seems likely that the narrative which views inequality as yesterday's news will continue to prevail, ensuring there is little political will from either of the main parties to recalibrate the rising inequality, which all the evidence indicates is behind growing fear, distrust and mental illness. In their conclusions the authors of the recent review into knife crime said: 'The link between crime and the deeper structural causes of inequality, poverty and social disaffection needs to be acted upon if the solutions are to be more than cosmetic and short term.' The study also concluded that 'the lack of research and co-ordinated, evidence-based policies to deal with the problem is hard to justify', reflecting a political culture which is often tempted to dismiss research in favour of headlines. The consequence is that the government continues to focus on zero tolerance policies which are not backed up by evidence but which promote 'social disparagement', making the problem worse. Despite David Cameron's early interventions which suggested an interest in boosting understanding, reflected by his much derided and misreported 'hug a hoodie' speech, recent claims that Labour is not being tough enough on knife crime, alongside proposals to increase stop and search, suggest this has been short-lived.

At the same time, visible segregation continues to grow, as a result of policies like defensible space and the creation of privatised parts of the city. As mental health problems increase, rather than dealing with the root causes, which lie in segregation and inequality, quick fixes like Cognitive Behaviour Therapy are pursued, which enable people to cope with problems in the short term but do not deal with the causes of depression in the long term. This is a therapeutic technique pioneered in the United States, which has some of the highest rates of mental illness in the world, raising the question of why America is considered such an exemplar for Britain to follow when it comes to mental health.

The two root causes of fear and distrust are visible inequality and a media culture which heightens the climate of fear. It would take a shift away from our American model of capitalism towards a more interventionist model, common in parts of Europe and Scandinavia, to seriously begin to tackle rising inequality. However, smaller shifts in policy direction can make a difference, and an awareness of the importance of 'social disparagement' might influence policy-makers away from policies advocating zero tolerance, defensible space and high security and towards approaches which undermine fear and promote trust.

With a few notable exceptions, newspapers remain keen to sell papers on the back of crime stories which people find compelling, and it is hard to see how a more responsible media, which helps build trust between citizens and institutions, can flourish in such a commercially-driven environment. A few media outlets do provide more rigorous coverage, in particular the BBC and Channel 4 News, because of their public service remit. If there is to be any chance of improving levels of trust between institutions and the public, this public service remit needs to be properly supported and extended.

## About the author

Anna Minton is a writer and journalist. Her forthcoming book, *Ground Control*, will be published by Penguin in 2009.

## Footnotes

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