

# What are today's social evils?

This summary presents the findings of a public consultation exploring the social evils facing Britain today. In 1904, Joseph Rowntree identified what he believed were the worst social evils. The new list is the result of a web survey of 3,500 people and discussions with groups whose voices are not usually heard. It reveals a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society.

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## Participants highlighted the following concerns about how we seem to live our lives:

- *A decline of community*: communities are weak and people are increasingly isolated from their neighbours, at considerable cost to well-being and happiness.
- *Individualism*: people tend to see themselves as individuals and not as part of wider society, leading to selfishness and insularity.
- *Consumerism and greed*: an excessive desire for money and consumer goods has eclipsed values and aspirations rooted in relationships and communities.
- *A decline of values*: there is no longer a set of shared values to guide behaviour. Participants emphasised a lack of tolerance, compassion and respect shown to others.

## Against this backdrop, people identified the following, more concrete, social evils:

- *The decline of the family*: family breakdown and poor parenting were felt to cause many other social problems and leave young people particularly vulnerable.
- *Young people as victims or perpetrators*: Young people were seen as perpetrators of social evils like anti-social behaviour, or the victims of stereotypes and limited opportunities.
- *Drugs and alcohol*: misuse of drugs and alcohol was viewed as the consequence and cause of many other social problems, like family breakdown and poverty.
- *Poverty and inequality*: poverty was viewed as a corrosive social evil in an affluent society, underpinning other social problems, such as homelessness and family breakdown.
- *Immigration and responses to immigration*: participants felt that local residents lose out to immigrants in competition for scarce resources. Others criticised negative attitudes to and lack of support for immigrants and thought society should be more tolerant and inclusive.
- *Crime and violence*: people felt that Britain is more dangerous and violent than in the past. Child abuse and exploitation were highlighted as particularly damaging evils.

Government, media, big business and religion were believed to be responsible for these social evils. People also emphasised *personal responsibility* for social evils, but thought bad choices and damaging behaviour could be symptoms of underlying social problems, such as poverty. They also thought some social evils are *embedded* in current ways of living and thinking.

# Introduction

A century has passed since Joseph Rowntree set up the three trusts which bear his name to “search out the underlying causes of weakness or evil in the community”. In 1904, he identified poverty, war, slavery, intemperance, the opium trade, impurity and gambling as the “great scourges of humanity”. Joseph Rowntree recognised, however, that times would change and he wanted the trusts to be “free to adapt themselves to the ever-changing necessities of the nation”. This consultation revisits the concept of ‘social evil’ and explores the underlying problems that cause the most damage to British society or the most misery to its people.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s public consultation asked ‘*What are today’s social evils?*’ Ten social evils are detailed in this summary, but many other concerns were raised, including gender inequality; religion and the decline of religion; the provision of health services and care; and environmental issues such as global warming. These are discussed in more detail in a separate report by Beth Watts.

## The consultation

The consultation had two strands. A web-based consultation was held from July to September 2007 at [www.socialevils.org.uk](http://www.socialevils.org.uk). Anyone could contribute to this by visiting the website and listing their top three social evils. Some 3,500 people took part and a further 100 responses were sent to the JRF by post. However, this group was not representative of the British population generally – for example, black and minority ethnic groups and younger people were under-represented. Furthermore, it was recognised that conducting the web consultation might exclude some groups whose voices are not usually heard, who might have limited access to the internet.

The National Centre for Social Research was commissioned to address these concerns and ensure that the voices of these potentially excluded groups were heard. They explored the questions of today’s social evils with groups less likely to be reached through the

web consultation. In total, 60 people took part in eight discussion groups held across England and Scotland in September and October 2007. Participants were recruited through a number of charitable organisations working with groups of people whose voices are not usually heard, and included people with learning difficulties, ex-offenders, people with experience of homelessness, unemployed people, care leavers and carers. A particular attempt was made to include black and minority ethnic groups and young people.

This summary examines the results of the consultations, identifying the ten key social evils that have emerged. While some people felt uncomfortable with the word ‘evil’, with its religious connotations and inherent negativity, the phrase has clearly struck a chord. Moreover, although the contributions of the unheard voices stand out because of their personal experience of many of the social evils identified, it is striking how similar the social problems identified by each group were.

## **A decline of community**

A major theme that emerged from the consultation was a decline of community and weakened local neighbourhoods. Participants felt that neighbours no longer know or look out for one another, which left people feeling isolated, lonely and fearful – particularly the elderly and those who live alone. People also spoke of a decline of community in a more abstract sense, in terms of a lack of public spiritedness or social responsibility. Older people spoke 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!’”  
(Unemployed man, discussion group participant)

While it was recognised that new kinds of communities were emerging (such as virtual or online communities) people felt these were an inadequate substitute for the face-to-face interactions of more traditional local communities.

## **Individualism and selfishness**

There was a strong sense that this decline of community has corresponded to a rise in individualism. Participants suggested that people increasingly look after their own individual or family interests without considering the needs of society or the community.

“Nothing is more important than my success, comfort and convenience – and that of my family.”  
(Website participant)

This individualism was seen to have damaging consequences, fuelling selfishness and greed and leading to isolation and fear as people struggle to cope and live fulfilling lives alone.

## **Consumerism and greed**

A common theme was that values and aspirations rooted in communities and relationships have been eclipsed by an excessive desire for consumer goods. Greed emerged as a key issue, seemingly a symptom of society valuing things in terms of money or material worth. People argued that the concept of *need* or of *having enough* has been forgotten and that we are losing sight of the things that are really important in life – things that can't be bought and sold, such as friendship and kindness.

“Everything seems to be based around money and owning things. The more you have, the more successful you are. There's nothing wrong with having enough, but there's pressure on people to go for more and more.”  
(Website participant)

These issues of consumerism and greed did not emerge as strongly from the unheard voices, but there was a shared concern about the impact of celebrity culture on society and particularly on young people.

## **A decline of values**

One website participant suggested: “in the world we've created, there's no such thing as ‘right and wrong’ any more”. Participants felt that we lack a set of shared values which guide people's behaviour and interactions. This was strongly associated with individualism,

selfishness and consumerism: people were described as pursuing their own desires regardless of potential harm to others. The consultation also identified other virtues that participants believed informed people's behaviour more in the past. A decline of honesty, tolerance, empathy and compassion, respect and reciprocity were seen to have damaging consequences for society.

People felt that this decline of values has occurred not only at the individual level: the media, business institutions and the government were criticised for being dishonest and self-serving. Participants often associated this issue with a decline of religion and the loss of Christianity as a foundation for ethical behaviour in Britain, although other participants identified religion itself as a social evil, that causes confusion and conflict.

### **The decline of the family**

Family breakdown and poor parenting were said to underlie many other social problems and to leave young people without sufficient guidance or support. While 'bad parents' were criticised, it was also argued that parents were often doing their best in difficult circumstances. People emphasised that parenting is a skill and that getting it right can require support. Young parents were highlighted as a group in particular need of guidance.

Participants agreed that having a strong family was very important for children, but disagreed about the importance of a traditional family structure. Some felt that having a cohesive family of any form was enough, whereas others highlighted the importance of having a mother and a father. Experience of family breakdown among the unheard voices was widespread. Many of the young people involved had grown up in care, something universally described as negative. They talked about periods of family disruption or violent family backgrounds acting as a catalyst for 'going off the rails'. This was also suggested by web respondents, who saw family breakdown as a cause of anti-social behaviour among young people.

### **Young people as victims or perpetrators**

There was disagreement about whether young people are the perpetrators or victims of social evil. Some participants criticised youth culture and blamed young people for anti-social behaviour, binge drinking, violence, gun and knife crime and other problems.

**"Young people [have] no manners, no self-control, no respect for anything."  
(Website participant)**

Others focused on how young people are failed by their families and the school system, and are misrepresented in the media.

**"There is a wealth of potential in young people ... they tend to be stigmatised rather than encouraged."  
(Website participant)**

There was also concern about the perceived "growing gulf between the old and the young", as one website participant put it, and the negative attitudes this can encourage between generations.

Young people in the unheard groups talked about how their place in wider society felt uncomfortable. There were concerns that young people lack good role models and that some face limited opportunities and job prospects. Negative stereotyping was a common concern, borne out by comments from older participants, who expressed their – at times unfounded – fear of young people:

**"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, discussion group participant)**

### **Misuse of drugs and alcohol**

Participants saw the misuse of drugs and alcohol as very damaging to society, primarily because of the connections between substance misuse and violence, crime and anti-social behaviour. Drug and alcohol misuse was suggested as a cause of ill-health, poverty and family breakdown. Conversely, drug and alcohol misuse was also described as a *consequence* of family breakdown, weak communities, child abuse, domestic violence, poverty, stress, unemployment and lack of opportunities or education. Participants recognised that it could provide “a means of escape from social, economic, and other personal problems” (website participant). There was also concern that celebrities, films and television can sometimes glamorise drug and alcohol use, especially among young people. The misuse of drugs and alcohol stands out, then, as a social evil that is both the cause and consequence of many other social problems.

Many of these concerns were echoed in the personal experiences of the unheard voices: some older participants highlighted the damaging nature of drug-taking and the devastating effects drugs could have. Ex-offenders who took part in the research spoke about the connections between drugs and crime in their lives. It is worth noting that participants in the unheard groups also recognised the role of personal choice, emphasising that sometimes they took drugs because they enjoyed it.

### **Poverty and inequality**

Poverty was described as a social evil because of its debilitating effects on people’s lives. This was reflected in the testimonies of the unheard voices, where poverty was described as a trap – a constraining force that prevents people from achieving their aspirations.

Participants suggested that poverty was closely intertwined with other social evils. For example, they described how, in a deprived community, making money from drug dealing can seem an appealing option to young people, reflecting the

“... 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, discussion group participant)

notion that poverty is “the keystone to other social problems” (website participant). There was widespread concern about inequality – the polarisation of society into ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. Web respondents felt that growing inequality in Britain is socially divisive and morally wrong, partly because income differences do not always reflect people’s efforts. Participants in the unheard groups added a different perspective. They recognised that people doing well would welcome growing affluence, but noted that there was a whole swathe of people not benefiting. While some participants expressed a sense of disillusionment and hopelessness, others talked about personal responsibility for getting ahead in life.

### **Immigration and responses to immigration**

People had a variety of perspectives on immigration. Participants sometimes identified immigration itself as a social evil, but often focused more specifically on the competition for limited resources (such as jobs and housing) that it can create. Participants felt that local residents can lose out to immigrants for these things.

“Why bring over more and more people when you can’t sort the problems you got?”

(Young person with experience of homelessness, discussion group participant)

In this way, the social evil was the systems in place for those in need, rather than immigrants themselves.

Other people highlighted the economic and social advantages that immigration has brought

to Britain and were critical of intolerant and negative attitudes towards immigrants and other people thought of as 'outsiders'. There was a feeling that society should be more inclusive and supportive of these groups and that people should have "a more rounded view of immigration, based on facts, and could see it as being part of the UK's rich tapestry" (website participant). Participants also focused on the lack of compassion shown to asylum seekers and refugees entering the UK.

Intolerance, discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping of people who are different (in terms of ethnicity, religion or sexuality) were other themes that emerged. Many people saw racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination as social evils. However, there was a tension between this and elements of prejudice and discrimination towards homosexuals or young people, for example, present in the responses.

### Crime and violence

Participants expressed a feeling that Britain is more dangerous and violent than it used to be. As well as identifying violence and other kinds of crime as social evils, they highlighted *fear of crime and violence* as another important dimension. People expressed anxieties about the perceived prevalence of violence, aggression and crime and a sense of unease about what might happen.

"People resort to violence for what seems like fairly trivial provocation."

(Website participant)

Connections were made between drug use, gangs and crime, which participants in the unheard groups could sometimes talk about from personal experience. Drug addiction was also connected to prostitution and the sexual exploitation of young girls.

Child abuse, exploitation and violence against women were cited as specific crimes that were social evils. There was a consensus that these were absolute 'wrongs' in the research with

unheard voices and so they were discussed less than some of the more contentious social issues.

### Who or what influences 'social evils'?

Most commonly cited as responsible for social evils were *government* and the *media*. The government were seen to be out of touch with the real issues people face and to be ineffective at tackling social problems. The media was criticised for fuelling negative and damaging attitudes and behaviours. *Big business* and *religion* were also said to be responsible: religion was identified as a cause of conflict and confusion and big businesses were blamed for fuelling inequality and consumerism.

In addition to these four institutions, people also emphasised the importance of individual choice in causing and perpetuating social evil and stressed people's personal responsibility for overcoming social problems. Others blamed the structure of society, which can limit opportunities and underlie problematic or damaging behaviour. Some participants suggested that social evils are entrenched in current ways of living and thinking and that we seem to be locked into a culture where consumerism and greed are prioritised over other people and the community.

# Conclusion

The phrase 'social evil' has struck a chord with people and tapped into their thoughts on the fundamental challenges that face Britain today. This is true of both the unheard voices who took part and those who responded to the web consultation. The responses of groups whose voices are not usually heard add a crucial perspective and tell a story of 'truncated opportunities': of lives lived with an overwhelming sense of constraint, limited escape routes and little social mobility. The thoughts of these groups reflect their proximity to social evil and underline the importance of ensuring that such voices are heard in debates like this.

The overriding impression from the consultation is that people feel a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. People are concerned about the way our society has become more individualistic, greedy and selfish, seemingly at a cost to our sense of community. As one website participant said, "We are in danger of losing sight of what is important in life, like kindness, playfulness, generosity and friendship. The immaterial things that can't be bought and sold." The focus on greed as an issue reflects concern about the growing gulf between the rich and the poor. Poverty was identified as a particular evil in a time of relative affluence. Connected to all of these issues was the perception that we no longer share a set of common values and that we have lost our 'moral compass'.

Against this backdrop of social changes, some specific evils were identified: family breakdown, the behaviour and treatment of young people, drugs and alcohol, poverty and inequality, immigration and intolerance and crime and violence. These are issues that already preoccupy the media and politicians and many of them were identified as social evils over a century ago by Joseph Rowntree. This consultation highlights the failure of past efforts to overcome them. In this context, it is no surprise that there is a sense of uncertainty about what needs to be done to overcome these complex, intertwined problems.

As well as identifying some phenomena that people widely agree are social evils, the consultation also reveals areas of contention: is religion or its decline a social evil? Is immigration an 'evil' or do we simply need to adapt to and embrace growing social diversity? Where there are such disagreements, the question of how we might resolve these issues is even more challenging.

It is important to recognise that, by asking people about social evils, we heard their views on the worst things affecting our society and so this bleak self-portrait of British society has ignored its more positive features. However, we hope that an agenda for change and improvement will emerge from this critical reflection on the state of British society.

This consultation forms the first phase of the Foundation's work on today's social evils. In the second phase of the programme we will explore in greater depth some of the issues that have emerged from this consultation and consider possible solutions.

## The consultation

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## For further information

The full reports are published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. They are available as free downloads from [www.socialevils.org.uk](http://www.socialevils.org.uk).

**What are today's social evils? The results of a web consultation** (2008) Watts, B.

**Modern-day social evils: The voices of unheard groups** (2008) Mowlam, A. and Creegan, C.

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