



# Do wrongs make a riot?

Were the August riots 'simply criminality' or a symptom of a wider malaise? Looking at the key sectors of education, employment and family wellbeing, expert commentators explore whether society actually is 'broken' – and how it can be fixed

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## THE WIDENING GAP

**Dr Lee Elliot Major, Director - Research and Policy,  
The Sutton Trust**

HAD MICHAEL YOUNG'S prophecy come to pass? This was the immediate question that came to mind as I sat in horror in my home in North London as the riots appeared to be getting closer and closer to our local area.

In his classic 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* Young predicted the creation of a new powerful 'meritocratic elite' that would eventually lead to society's downfall as an underclass became increasingly disenfranchised. This elite would justify its stranglehold of power by closely controlling what 'merit' constituted. And with no stake in society left, the underclass would take to the streets. Chillingly, Young's vision seemed to be realised during those nights when the streets in London, Birmingham and Manchester became battlegrounds.

One would not want to overstate the case here: the summer riots were triggered by a multitude of factors – tensions with the police after a controversial shooting, opportunistic lawlessness, and boredom among them. But the fact that so many of our young had so little to risk to so brazenly break the law, suggests that perhaps they could be the generation, consciously or not, who fulfil Young's prophecy.

But then as suddenly as the riots had erupted, normal life seemed to resume – save for the odd boarded-up shopfront. Only in Britain, one felt, could so much happen, and yet so little change. And in the weeks after the disturbances, the annual school results were published. The usual

news stories emerged. Pupils from independent schools were three times more likely to score top A-levels than students in state comprehensives. Independently-educated children were set to gain even more places at Britain's most prestigious universities.

The huge weight of academic evidence suggests that social mobility is lower than it could or should be in the country. Family background, rather than individual talent, matters more in Britain (and the United States) in predicting future earnings than most other developed countries for which we have data.

The privileged classes continue to dominate our professional elites. Two thirds of the current Cabinet were privately educated – despite private schools making up only seven per cent of schools. Over half of leading news journalists, and eight in ten of high court judges went to private school. One study by Bristol University found that the latest generations of children entering professions such as law or journalism were more likely to come from more prosperous homes, but less likely to be one of the cleverest children in class at age 11 than previous cohorts. Our elites are becoming posher, but less clever.

Meanwhile, every year half of children leaving school at age 16 have failed to reach basic levels in English and maths – many of whom we know had academic potential to do so. At the same time opportunities for more vocational or creative development are still seen and treated as an inferior option by most, good only 'for someone else's children'.

As Young rightly predicted, academic evidence also suggests that widening income inequality

leads to a cycle of ever-increasing opportunity gaps between rich and poor. As the privileged accrue more wealth, they are able to devote ever more resources to maximise the educational achievements of their children – paying by fees or postcode or private tuition for them to attend the best schools. At the same time educational achievements – most notably prestigious university degrees – have increasingly become the golden tickets to exclusive entry into the professional elites, and higher earning jobs.

In this and other ways, income inequality and educational inequality reinforce each other in an endless generational feedback loop, leading to an increasingly ossified society.

Inevitably and depressingly the long-term implications of the riots have polarised political opinions, and been exploited for point-scoring

in Parliament. The Prime Minister has spoken in terms of a moral crusade, wanting to mend poor parenting and a society of broken values. The Labour leader has sought instead to stress the inequalities in circumstances and lack of opportunities experienced by the people who took to the streets.

Shorn of political rhetoric, both of these insights could, and are likely, to have some truth to them. While family resources are important to future life prospects, it is often the things that cost nothing – support, aspirations, drive – that are found to make the difference to the development of young children. Whatever the answers, one point from Young's book is irrefutable: failure to solve one generation's problems will simply store up even greater problems for future generations. We reap what we sow.



## LOW WAGE OR NO WAGE

**Dr Mark Taylor, Director of Research, ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change**

AS THE BRITISH economy struggles to emerge from its first recession in almost 20 years, and the worst recession since the Second World War in terms of loss of output, the unemployment rate has remained lower than at the same stage in previous recessions. Thus far, it has peaked at less than nine per cent, compared with ten per cent at the same stage in the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s. Falls in the employment rate have also been modest compared with previous recessions.

Taken at face value, these facts suggest that the labour market has remained relatively strong. But what if we dig a bit deeper? The employment prospects of particular population subgroups have been affected more than others by the recession, and those of young people in particular. Unemployment rates among 16-24 year olds doubled between 2008 and 2010 to almost 20 per cent, and were even higher among those with low educational achievement. In contrast, unemployment rates among 25-49 year olds remained below seven per cent. Although young people are always more adversely affected by economic downturns, they have been affected much more by the recent recession than previous recessions relative to older workers. Perhaps more worryingly, unemployment among young people started to rise in the years prior to the financial crisis and subsequent recession – it has been rising since 2004 – suggesting that other factors lay behind the rise in unemployment among young people.

There is also evidence that an increasing proportion of jobs are of low quality – yielding low wages, poor promotion prospects and contributing little to the wellbeing of those employed in them. There is a large proportion of the UK

working population in peripheral or unstable jobs faced with low pay and short-term contractual arrangements.

Furthermore wage inequality has increased substantially over the previous 30 years with the wages of people in low-skilled, low-quality jobs falling further behind those of people in more highly skilled jobs. One consequence of these trends is an increase in working poverty as employment has become a less secure means of escaping financial hardship. This polarisation in the labour market raises the possibility of less skilled workers becoming trapped in low wage jobs and unable to progress into 'good' jobs unless firms provide career ladders or suitable training opportunities to make such jobs accessible to those in 'bad' jobs.

Therefore the headline unemployment and employment figures hide trends that should be of concern to policymakers. It is important to understand why unemployment among young people had been increasing prior to the onset of recession, to ensure that young people remain attached to the labour market on leaving school, and to ensure that mechanisms remain in place to facilitate career progress into stable jobs. Otherwise there will be a large group of potentially disaffected young people suffering the lasting scars of unemployment and peripheral employment, including poverty and material deprivation. ►





### SUPPORTING STRUGGLING FAMILIES

**Dr Elizabeth Young, Director of Research and Policy, Home-Start UK**

WHETHER WE REFER to society as 'broken' or 'challenged' is at one level a question of semantics, and the phrase 'broken society' resonates in different ways with different people. Working to support families at Home-Start, we know there are families who are vulnerable to the repercussions of a depressed economy and the accompanying reduced public services.

Across the UK demand for our services has increased by up to 75 per cent over the last few months. Thirteen per cent of the families in our statistics needed support to manage their budgets, and 7.5 per cent of the families we supported last year have children on child protection plans. These figures represent a real challenge, every day, for the families behind the figures.

Family support organisations like Home-Start have the experience and skills to manage these challenges. Across the UK thousands of Home-Start volunteers visit families at home each week, supporting parents who are struggling to cope. What we will not have is the capacity to continue to help if demand continues to increase. These are very real current challenges, but are not necessarily reflective of families causing a broken society.

The term 'broken society' alludes to concepts connected with values, social capital and connectivity. These things are difficult to express and measure. So, for example, families come to Home-Start because they are socially isolated (55 per cent of the families we support). Is this a marker for a broken society?

Home-Start works to build the strengths of these families and this starts in their own homes. Allowing a volunteer to visit regularly in your home is itself an act of trust. It creates the basis for respectful relationships. From this basis families can be supported to change their behaviours, develop their skills and build their confidence as parents.

So, from a position of trust between the volunteer and the family – perhaps the antithesis of a broken society – the family are enabled to become more able to cope, to feel able to develop and then trust their tuned parenting skills and engage in their wider community. Furthermore it is a commitment of Home-Start to enable parents to enjoy being parents. Trust in oneself and others, confidence, engagement, enjoyment – these are all aspects of a strong family and these strengths resonate beyond the home and contribute to a more coherent society.

Volunteers have been coming forward to help in increasing numbers over the last twelve months. We see this as evidence of a connectivity in society and of a desire to help that is strong – and that is seen across the full spectrum of communities in the UK. It is evidence that all of society is not broken. Sixteen thousand volunteers support Home-Start families every year; the total helping all charities is immense.

Financial hardship and uncertainty exacerbates the vulnerabilities of already fragile families. However, there are positive outcomes available for vulnerable families if support can be provided. Perhaps what needs to be fixed is the economy so that families facing challenges can continue to be supported. ■

