

# Fearing for the future

For ten years researchers from the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion visited the same 200 families in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the UK. The findings – now published in a new book, *Family Futures* – provide a clue to the many frustrations that led to the riots this summer, argues **Anne Power**.



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For ten years researchers from the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion visited the same 200 families in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the UK. The findings – now published in a new book, *Family Futures* – provide a clue to the many frustrations that led to the riots this summer, argues **Anne Power**.

After rioting erupted in several English cities this summer the country searched for explanations. Why was this happening? How could people destroy their own streets like this? What could stop it happening again?

Most explanations did not make sense of such complex and contradictory events. The massive and repeat disorders were described as “uncontrolled criminal lawlessness”; or “an inevitable consequence of the brutal funding cuts”, hitting young, out-of-work, out-of-school teenagers particularly hard. Yet the reality is more complex, for these are neither “feral children” nor “helpless victims”. They are frustrated, worried young citizens who see their futures closed off from them.

*Family Futures: childhood and poverty in urban neighbourhoods* (2011), which I co-wrote with Helen Willmot and Rosemary Davidson, highlights parents' dominant worry: their children's future. The book is based on ten years' research visiting the same 200 families each year, in highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. We wanted to find out about obstacles and progress in bringing up children in difficult areas. Which parts of their lives involved the biggest struggle? Which policy changes actually improved things in the country's most deprived areas?

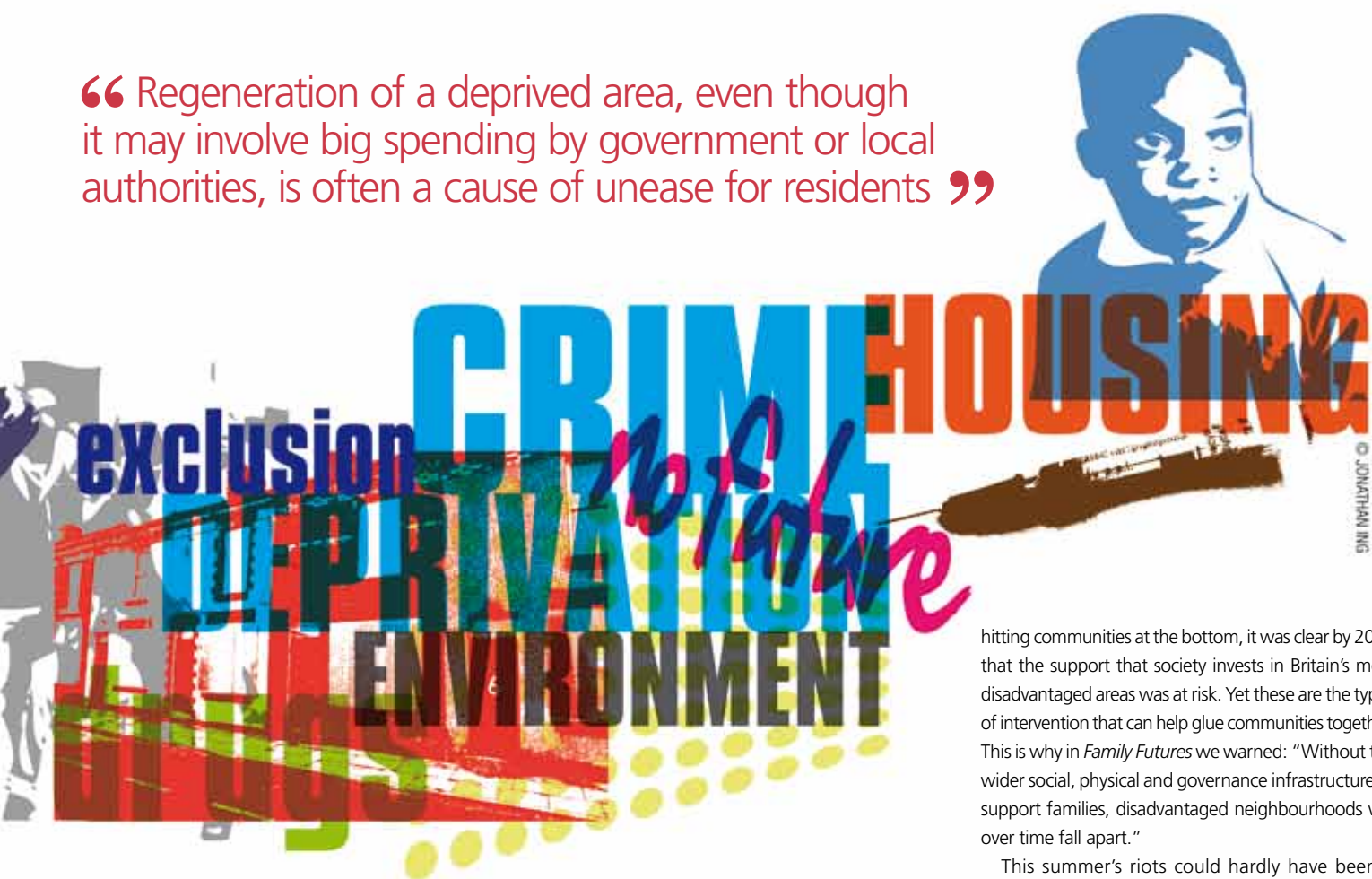
Our research illuminates clearly that even small improvements to the fabric of a community can

dramatically improve the lives and chances of people who live there, particularly for families with children. For instance, keeping the local swimming pool open, secure entrances on a housing estate, or reclaiming an open space where young people can let off steam – these are relatively modest improvements that have a profound impact on confidence, optimism and well-being.

And it is this clear cause and effect between physical or environmental improvements to an area and the well-being of its families that suggests one simple way of explaining social disorder. Rather than reaching for moral or metaphysical terms such as “feckless” or “evil”, it may make more sense to look at the components of everyday life – housing, jobs, schools, transport, leisure, health and policing – and how they help or hinder a community. Where they fail, they leave it on the verge of collapse.

*Family Futures* was published a month before the riots broke out. In the conclusion, we asked "How far have poor neighbourhoods come in a decade of special initiatives, and how much further do they have to go before all young people have an equal chance of succeeding?" We found that the financial pressure to cut support to areas like these risked pushing them over the cliff edge. The spectacle of arson and looting that erupted in London, Manchester, Birmingham and other cities in early August was

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shocking, but it is hard not to see events as, at least in part, connected to the pressures faced by our most deprived communities and young people.

It is these pressures that *Family Futures* tries to understand. We talked to families (usually mothers) from Hackney and Newham in London and from large estates in Leeds and Sheffield. Often, what they told us was surprising.

For example, regeneration of a deprived area, even though it may involve big spending by government or local authorities, is often a cause of unease for residents. The promise of new facilities is outweighed by the pain of upheaval and a fear that they will have no say in the reshaping of their community, increasing a sense of powerlessness to control events around them. As one woman put it: “I’m sure there’s some connection between all the changes that are happening, all the building and development and people not being listened to ... not feeling part of what’s going on.” This sense of exclusion has a devastating impact, particularly on young people.

People’s attitudes to jobs were strikingly positive. Although most parents did relatively low-skilled jobs they valued the income and confidence that the work added to their lives. Unlike more professional people, they almost never used terms like “crap jobs” to devalue vital work in cleaning, caring, security or retail, and were keen to advance through further

training and experience. One mother working as a cleaner told us: “I like the job but personally I think I’m capable of doing more, something better.”

For these families, work is not just a source of income but also one of self-esteem and a route to better things. Their attitude reflects the fact that their community is more important to them than for those of us who have more choice over where we live. Like all of us, they worry about schools, play spaces, the need for children to let off steam, crime, health, housing and their environment. Yet because they have little control over most of these things they rely on government and the wider society to help them improve their lives.

Our study was conducted from 1998 to 2008. Over that time many parents agreed that their lives had improved in some ways. Fear of crime, for instance, had lessened with the introduction of community police support officers and with better management of run-down or damaged homes and streets. Most parents agreed that housing, education and the environment had improved over the ten years. But there were also entrenched problems that bothered all parents. Top of their list of problems were disaffected young people, gangs and drugs; too few play areas and sports facilities for young people to let off steam; and too few job opportunities.

Lurking behind all these problems are cuts in spending. With the worst recession since the 1930s

hitting communities at the bottom, it was clear by 2008 that the support that society invests in Britain’s most disadvantaged areas was at risk. Yet these are the types of intervention that can help glue communities together. This is why in *Family Futures* we warned: “Without the wider social, physical and governance infrastructure to support families, disadvantaged neighbourhoods will over time fall apart.”

This summer’s riots could hardly have been a starker illustration of what is at stake. Whatever the multiple causes of the riots – deprivation, boredom, greed or grievance – the consequences of social fracture fall hardest on the communities that went up in flames during that terrifying week in August. The people who live in these neighbourhoods need a web of support to allow them to contribute as fully as they can to society. This does not mean that we should treat rioters as victims, but we should collectively understand what investment in a shared future can achieve – and what it can prevent. ■



**Anne Power** is a professor of social policy at LSE.



*Family Futures: childhood and poverty in urban neighbourhoods* by Anne Power, Helen Willmot and Rosemary Davidson was published by Policy Press in July 2011, price £24.99.

It can be ordered at 20 per cent discount from their website: [policypress.co.uk/display.asp?K=9781847429704](http://policypress.co.uk/display.asp?K=9781847429704). The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Nuffield and Esmée Fairburn Foundations, Sport England, Defra and an anonymous donor.