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Title:

Oh behave! Civic ill health and youth unemployment in fractured communities

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[David Cameron's speech](#) and the recent riots signify more than just a wake up call for policy and a moral breakdown across Britain. They expose the vacuous nature of the Big Society, that government does not really understand what is actually going on in communities, the labour market nor how to tackle these problems. The absence of the words 'social cohesion' and 'unemployment' and the 16 references to 'behaviour' in the speech were a notable slide away from addressing the social context of behaviour: poor neighbourhoods, unemployment and deprivation. Much like the French response to the Paris riots in 2005, Cameron's approach has been to increase police effectiveness because the polls say so (no easy task given extensive budget cuts!), while punishing rioters by withdrawing welfare benefits.

And how could the Government know what's going on? The Home Office Citizenship survey which provides our only reliable source of information on the ['civic health'](#) and quality of life in local communities has been abolished. However, a cursory glance at the available data is strikingly clear: draw a map of the outbreak of riots, and a map of the places with high [youth unemployment](#), and [low levels of social cohesion and sense of neighbourhood in the UK](#), and you will realise immediately that you are staring at the same picture.

Youth have borne the brunt of the global financial downturn of 2007. Those who went to school find a job market where routinely 100 candidates apply for 1 spot. Those without skills have even dimmer prospects, as manufacturing and low-skilled jobs have been on the decline since the 1980s. The UK average unemployment rate is about 7%. However, in each of the riots areas JSA claimant rates among young people 16-24 is often 4-5 percent higher. Added to this are those outside of the formal welfare system those [Not in Education, Employment and Training \(NEETS\)](#) which in areas such as Enfield nearly doubled between 2008-09. Similar figures are found in Salford 24% Birmingham (26%), Hackney (26%), and Haringey (23%) with neighbouring areas such as Tower Hamlets also displaying high levels.

People aged 16 to 24 not in education, employment or training by Local Authority. Latest available statistics. Annual Population Survey

	Numbers			Percentages		
	2007	2008	2009	2007	2008	2009
England	849,000	854,000	972,000	14.4%	14.3%	16.2%
Birmingham	30,000	28,000	31,000	20%	20%	23%
Enfield	4,000	3,000	6,000	14%	12%	22%
Hackney	4,000	5,000	5,000	17%	20%	26%
Haringey	4,000	6,000	7,000	16%	21%	23%
Islington	4,000	3,000	5,000	15%	13%	19%
Manchester	12,000	13,000	12,000	15%	16%	15%
Salford	4,000	6,000	8,000	16%	22%	24%
Tower Hamlets	10,000	7,000	8,000	25%	22%	25%
Trafford	3,000	3,000	5,000	12%	13%	20%

These findings echo [our previous work](#) which looked at the relationship between rises in unemployment and homicides in Europe over the past 3 and a half decades. In general, each 1 percentage point rise in unemployment was linked to about a 0.8% rise in homicides.

The diagnosis as relating to the economy and cuts to youth provision could be viewed as a damning indictment of ‘Big Society’ policies. At a time when people look to governments for help, leaders point the finger at those who are suffering. The current response to societal problems is to ask individuals to change their behaviour, with a little ‘nudge’ here and there. That approach may work in normal circumstances for certain behaviours, but the UK is undergoing an exceptional [period of very high youth unemployment](#).

Riots reflect the failure of the left and right political classes to invest in youth and their economic futures. Yes work is at the heart of a responsible society but so too is the provision of social protection for those who are outside of the labour market, are socially excluded and lack sufficient access to opportunities. Yes government alone cannot fix social problems but nor can individuals and communities do it themselves. The first step for policy is to realise that there is a deeper economic problem.

Any forthcoming policy needs to look at how the economic downturns and budget cuts have affected the ability to design and deliver effective social and economic policies.

Why does unemployment amongst youths in Manchester affect levels of social cohesion and rates of anti social behaviour? What data do we need to monitor the social changes occurring within communities? Does this data already exist?

Encouraging the [Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team](#) (Nudge Unit) to extend their remit to look at why people join gangs, engage in anti social behaviour, stay in education, take up jobs or remain on welfare or in fact would take up the proposed [Citizen Service scheme](#) would be more effective long-term options than tinkering with health and safety legislation.

Yes Cameron is correct to say that we should talk honestly about behaviour and that it is not created in a vacuum. However, he adopts an a-social approach and assumes it's all about legislation, rules and incentives. Indeed the [MINDSPACE](#) framework behind much of the behavioural approach Cameron has adopted never mentions poverty, unemployment or deprivation as behavioural determinants. Government and the services they deliver, provide and facilitate the social and economic environments in which individuals are able to make decisions about their employment, health, and life chances.

Policy changes need to be tailored around a more realistic and honest socio-economic understanding of how people really do make choices, interact with each other, enter the labour market, education and engage with society at large. In addition social protection for those left behind needs to be maintained not cut, whilst continuous and transparent dialogue is needed over how to reconcile the contract between state and individual responsibilities. Do we meet somewhere in the middle and co-produce healthy, productive and safe communities? This would lead not only to more effective and preventive policy but also enable the rioting youth to feel more in control of their own lives.