As tackling civil unrest remains pertinent to the Coalition's political agenda, new research provides insights into the success of Labour's social exclusion programme on disadvantaged families

Joan Wilson *examines new LSE research which offers lessons on the effectiveness of Labour's policies to tackle crime and social exclusion. In the present time of social unrest, the research offers some insights into how the Coalition might be able to move forward in addressing social exclusion in the UK.*

In January 2010 the National Equality Panel released a detailed report highlighting the stark disparities in economic outcomes in the UK, with divisions in earnings, income and wealth manifesting themselves through extreme clustered area deprivation in some parts of the country relative to others. During their time in power, the Labour government sought to tackle circumstances of multiple disadvantage and poverty through the formation of a Social Exclusion Unit, whose central purpose was to deliver policies aimed at closing the gap between the most underprivileged areas and the average. Despite the persistence of inequality in the UK today, there is scant evidence from the perspective of those directly affected by Labour's area-based initiatives on their effectiveness, what more urgently needs to be done, and the difference that they made, if any, to the construct of the low-income neighbourhoods that they targeted.

Recent research by Anne Power, Helen Willmot and Rosemary Davidson draws together qualitative findings from a seven year study of 200 families with children living in poor urban parts of the country. At a time when dealing with social unrest has become pertinent on the political agenda, following recent riots in major towns and cities throughout England, the research offers insights into approaches that the Coalition government should work on if ingrained imbalances within society are to be rectified.

The areas studied are characterised by rented social housing, lone-parent households, low-level skills, high worklessness and crime, and weak school performance. The study captures the opinions of mothers, as the primary heads of household, on family situations, area developments and successful strategies for change in every year from 1999 to 2006, thus offering grass-roots views on deeply entrenched social problems and potential solutions. Four neighbourhoods in particular are examined, where these feature within the Local Authority Districts (LADs) of Hackney, and Newham in London, and Leeds and Sheffield in the North. According to pre-study period statistics from the 1998 Index of Local Deprivation, Newham ranked as the 2nd most deprived LAD in England (Liverpool was 1st, out of 310 LADs), followed by Hackney (4th), Sheffield (25th) and then Leeds (56th).

One issue that surveyed parents considered of high priority was the need to provide safe, supervised indoor and outdoor spaces for frustrated and bored young people to "let off steam" through a programme of organised activities. In this respect, today's diminishing youth-based initiatives such as after-school clubs and youth groups require buttressed, prolonged investment, raised awareness of their availability, and a strong capacity to provide for personal and social development.

By the same token, young people need to secure non-cognitive skills if their behavioural attitudes are to change for the better, and the study indicates that non-academic routes to employment – in the form of practical, work-based apprenticeships and vocational qualifications – could offer a way forward for re-engaging secondary school pupils averse to the restrictions of classroom-centred learning. Furthermore, families, particular those in London, were frequently in favour of more order and discipline in class and were supportive of teachers and schools using discipline to foster control. These social problems were inadequately tackled through successive years of area-based social exclusion policies or the school improvement strategies of the former Labour government, and it is only now that things are slowly starting to change on the education front in terms of both the reinstatement of teacher authority and revisions to the quality and value of vocational learning.

One of the most successful local-level initiatives which was introduced on a national scale in 2002 was the targeting crime reduction through street supervision in the form of the Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) programme. Both personal experiences of crime and the anxiety associated with living in high crime regions impose serious barriers on the safety and liberty of families in disadvantaged areas. Indeed, parental preferences were for sending their children to close-by local schools where they could be kept in sight, a situation that was driven by fears for safety and the need to curtail perceived negative peer group

influences in the neighbourhood, and one that has likely limited the gains in educational opportunity that school choice options aim to offer. Although Labour came to power with the slogan "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime", the job of a PCSO is preventive, and involves Officers patrolling the streets, acting as an accessible point of community contact and remaining attuned to as well as dealing with local problems directly. Their visible presence was found to build up confidence among locals, to curb disorder, and to create a broad feeling that the area was being cared for.

A further scheme that gained much praise from the surveyed families was Sure Start, which was announced in 1998 and provides a community-based platform of support for vulnerable parents of pre-school-age children, living in poor areas. The initiative relies on parental involvement and delivers "training for parents, both in 'soft' skills such as parenting, family health, fitness and so on, as well as 'hard' skills like job training". The community contribution that Sure Start requires and the benefits derived from it suggest that this group of parents valued learning from each other. This implies that an alternative approach needs to be taken to curtail sensitivity surrounding the notion of the teaching of parenting skills, one that emphasises the value to the community and society of a supported, strengthened capacity for bringing up children rather than one which imposes negative reflections on parents' capabilities.

Overall, in the process of examining policy effectiveness, the research highlights how social capital matters more in low-income areas since, without a sense of community and involvement in it, poor families feel disenfranchised from local decisions that affect their neighbourhoods and livelihoods directly. On the other hand, engagement with local people bolsters their feelings of security and the ever-important concept of neighbourhood stability, while interaction may also counter the negative impacts of deprivation on mental health.

One conclusion to be drawn from this analysis, and indeed a clear consideration for policy, is that it is the *attitudes* of *all* people within areas and their commitment to area betterment that makes or breaks the success of targeted improvement initiatives and their capacity to effectively address issues of social exclusion.