



What are the experiences and concerns of white working class communities?

The research presented in this briefing is based upon a case study of Higher Blackley, a ward in north Manchester, which was part of a European-wide study undertaken on behalf of the Open Society Foundations' at Home in Europe project with marginalised majority populations in Western Europe.

White working-class communities have become an increasingly marginalised and maligned majority in the United Kingdom. Many social, political, economic and cultural changes have taken place over the last 40 years. This includes:

- Economic marginalisation, as the jobs lost to communities as a result of deindustrialisation have been replaced by low-paid and insecure jobs in service industries, making people more dependent on social security. In Higher Blackley for instance, ICI once employed 14,000 people, while the main employers in the area now are two supermarkets that pay below the 'living wage'.
- Political marginalisation, as it is felt that the political elites have increasingly neglected communities and focused on a middle-class section of society perceived as more likely to bring them electoral victory. In line with national trends of a steady decline in democratic engagement, the research uncovered residents who cited various reasons: apathy, lack of knowledge of a complex system, and a growing disillusionment with the policy-makers to address local concerns.
- Social and cultural marginalisation, as the media create stereotypes that demonise working-class communities as feckless scroungers who do not want to work but want to be live off the efforts of 'hard-working taxpayers' and claim social security as a 'lifestyle' choice. The research in Higher Blackley provided a much different picture.

Eroding safety nets

The Open Society Foundations' research has found that Higher Blackley has strong networks of support that provide a safety net. In times of cultural, demographic and economic change these support circles are increasingly relied upon. Far from being broken, these communities are often surviving in extremely difficult circumstances and have a strong work ethic.

White working class communities in Higher Blackley are experiencing social insecurity that impacts on people's lives, their families and the wider community in a range of different but cumulative ways. This insecurity and erosion in the sense of belonging has roots in deindustrialisation and the replacement of traditional jobs in manufacturing with low-skilled and low paid jobs in the service sector. Endemic low pay coupled with the increases in costs of living is making life increasingly difficult. The scale and pace of change at a local level has not been in line with the expectations or understanding for many of the longer-term residents in Higher Blackley, which in turn has fuelled negative perceptions about change that is not always reflective of realities.

The traditional social security net is being eroded, and the stability previously provided by social housing is being steadily reduced through a nationwide lack of available and affordable housing that translates locally into difficulties for families to stay together in the

areas in which they have social bonds. The effects of welfare reform have created further strain on people who are already feeling under pressure and the impacts are likely to become worse before any significant improvements are felt in individual lives.

Poorer outcomes

The results of this social insecurity can be seen in terms of poorer outcomes in education for white working class communities as children are affected by their families' social conditions. It also results in much worse health, especially in terms of mental health, which is connected to the low-pay/no-pay cycle that people experience. This all contributes to a cycle of insecurity that affects people across their whole lives and further compounds their sense of isolation and marginality.

The research evidenced the interconnected nature of different social and cultural issues and how this further strengthens the notion that public policy cannot be understood in isolation—each affects the other in cumulative and intersecting ways.

A hostile narrative

All these issues are largely ignored by mainstream media, which is often hostile and part of a wider narrative at a national level that focuses predominantly on the need for individual behavioural change, while failing to address the deeper roots of marginalisation. This failure to deal with fundamental issues has created a condition in which people do not believe in the promises of politicians and feel disempowered by the edicts of the 'do-gooders.'

Racist – or resentful?

As people feel insecure, social cohesion suffers. One really striking comment through the research was that: 'we're not racist, just resentful.' Even when this perception is in contrast to people's actualisation of their behaviours, it is such perceptions that must be addressed alongside the engagement of concerted action to address systemic marginalisation.

As people see their traditional networks of social security being removed or eroded, they have seen significant immigration and changing demographics bringing new arrivals into their area. This interacts with deeply rooted cultural anxieties, resulting in a situation in which immigration is often blamed for many of the problems that people identify. This can all contribute towards a rise in anti-immigration sentiments. Even when these fears of the 'other' do not match the reality of numbers of immigrants on the ground, the prevailing sense of their local communities changing before their eyes is a fear that resonates strongly with many and one that must be fully addressed.

Policy implications

Insecurity is a major issue that needs to be addressed through several different levers. These levers include (but are not limited to):

- Ensuring better paid and more secure work.
- Addressing mental health problems
- Exploring different ways through which the strengths that do exist in working class communities can be built upon and supported.
- Improved democratic engagement

About the speaker:

Dan Silver is a co-Director of the Social Action & Research Foundation, an anti-poverty think-tank (www.the-sarf.org.uk) The full findings of the research can be found at: <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/white-working-class-communities-manchester>



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