

The problems of British society

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Is Britain broken? What are the policy implications?

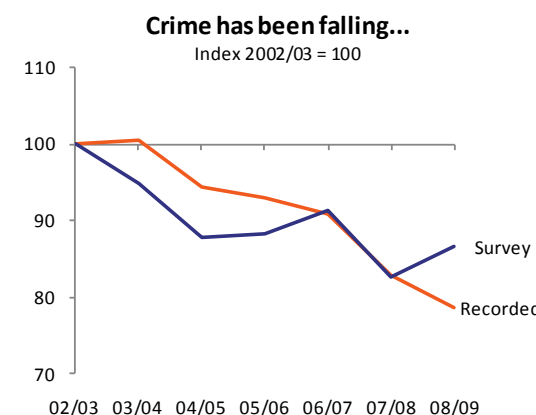
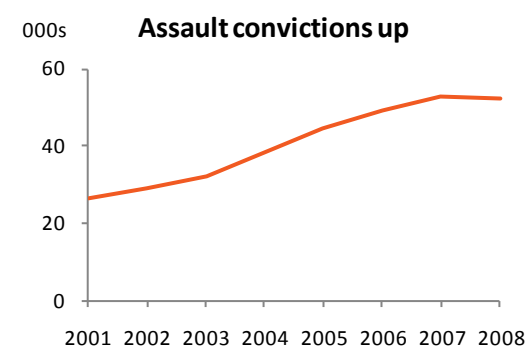
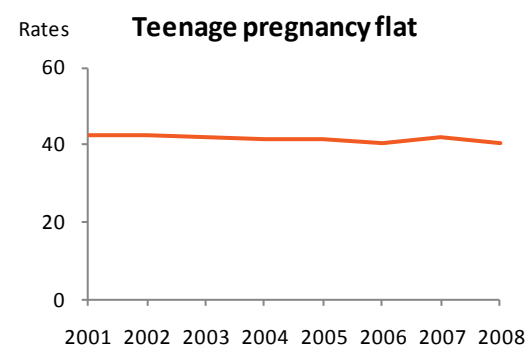
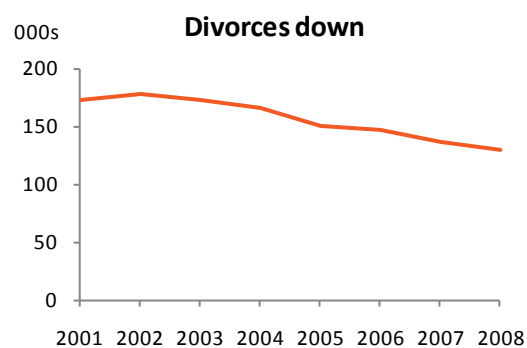
“Broken society” may be a catchy phrase, and useful for encompassing a variety of social ills, but what does it mean? Are the problems in our society really getting worse? And does the phrase point towards a coherent agenda for government action?

A MIXED PICTURE

Drug abuse, violent crime, teenage delinquency, family breakdown, welfare dependency, poor urban environments, educational failure, poverty, the loss of traditional values, teenage pregnancy, dysfunctional families, binge drinking, children who kill: all have been cited as proof that we have a broken society.

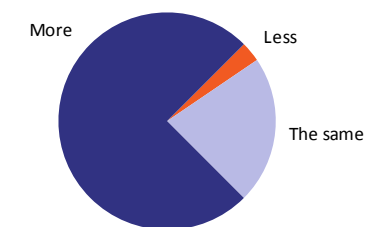
Tony Blair in 1995 asked us to look at “the wreckage of our broken society” and, using the now-familiar language of rights and responsibilities, called for a new civic society where everyone played a part. The phrase then really came into its own in the Conservative leadership campaign in 2005, first from Liam Fox and then with David Cameron taking up the term in his leadership acceptance speech. It is now strongly associated with Iain Duncan Smith’s work for the Centre for Social Justice and the Conservative’s Social Justice Policy Group, and the promise to “mend Britain’s broken society” became a dominant theme of the Conservative general election campaign.

But the picture is clearly more mixed than some commentators suggest. There are undoubtedly some serious social problems in Britain, and whilst some things have got worse, many have improved. Moreover, perceptions of some problems are increasingly wide of the mark.



... but few people perceive this to be the case

Perceptions of trends in national crime levels



Home Office

AN AGENDA FOR ACTION?

So if the reality does not always match the rhetoric, why does talk of a “broken society” strike a chord with so many people? Parts of the media have certainly latched on to the phrase and there is clearly unease across the political spectrum about how society is changing. For some, the state of society as they see it points towards moral decline and a collapse in community spirit. Others see the use of the term as another way of “blaming the victim”, deflecting attention from fundamental problems such as poverty and inequality. Either way, divorce and addictions amongst successful professionals rarely provoke the same response as do lone-parent families and substance abuse in poorer parts of society.

Whatever the reason for its wider appeal, politicians using the term “a broken society” have clearly presented it as the result of a failure of policy. By implication, therefore, policy can

help to “mend” it. But the causes of many social problems are unclear and/or disputed, and the evidence that government policy can influence behaviours in the intended direction is patchy at best.

Referring to a “broken society” may therefore be of little help when drawing up an effective agenda to tackle diverse and complex social issues. The test is whether new approaches will succeed where others are seen to have failed.