

Families and neighbourhoods

Claire James and Sally Gimson

Bringing up children is not just about what happens in the home, it is also about the environment and the neighbourhoods where families live. This YouGov survey of 2,105 parents was an attempt to explore how parents felt about their neighbourhoods, how involved they were in them and whether they thought they could do the best for their families there.

Despite reports of a broken society, many parents told us they talk to their neighbours, their children play together and they expected that other families would do favours for them.

Within this picture, however, there is great diversity. Poorer parents' experience of their neighbourhood is much more negative. Our snapshot survey underlines the socio-economic inequality that affects children's life chances, as analysed in the recent report by the Institute of Education, the National Children's Bureau and the Family and Parenting Institute, *Reducing Inequalities* (1).

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KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Income is a strong factor in families' experience of their neighbourhood. The poorer a family is, the more likely they are to feel unsafe after dark, and the less likely they are to feel that their neighbours would help out in a crisis. Poorer families are also less likely to have well-maintained green spaces nearby. Only 35 per cent of the poorest parents think they can do the best for their family in their neighbourhood, compared to 73 per cent of the richest.
- ▶ Parents in England think that there should be more activities for young people. Some 23 per cent of parents surveyed think this would be the one thing that would improve their neighbourhood for families compared to 37 per cent who want to see more action to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour. There is still great concern about this, particularly related to teenagers hanging around on the streets at night.
- ▶ Parents who live in rural areas are much more likely to see traffic as blighting their neighbourhoods. Many see improved public transport as their main priority (25 per cent).
- ▶ Families who live in London are more likely to be active in their community than people in other parts of the country, but they are less likely to have confidence in their local school or to have family living within a 15 to 20-minute journey.
- ▶ Children play a large role in their parents' friendships. Some 70 per cent of parents said they had met people or made friends through their children. Mothers were more likely to have made 'a lot of friends' (23 per cent).
- ▶ The average time for a family to have lived in their area is just over seven and a half years and two-thirds of parents are not involved in any community activity. Only five per cent of parents have lived in the same neighbourhood all their lives.
- ▶ Overall, most families report playgrounds and green spaces (if not well-maintained green spaces) within easy reach.

About the survey

This report is based on the results from the Family and Parenting YouGov 'Neighbourhood' bespoke survey (2); fieldwork was undertaken between 10 and 12 September 2007. The survey questions were asked of a sample of 2,105 parents with a child or children aged 16 or under. This survey was conducted online. No weighting factors have been applied to the data.

Of the families YouGov surveyed, 82 per cent were joint parent households, 11 per cent were single parents and 7 per cent were living apart but sharing parenting. There were 1,070 men and 1,035 women surveyed – which accounts for the smaller proportion of single parents in this sample (the national average being around 25 per cent, most of whom are women).

There were on average two children in each family and the survey represented a good cross section of parents from different social classes, regions, cities, towns and villages.

Unsurprisingly, respondents from inner city areas tended to be the least well off, and 29 per cent of these respondents lived in households with net incomes of less than £15,000 a year. Overall, the most prosperous areas were the suburbs, with other urban (not inner city) areas, small towns and rural areas lying somewhere in between.

Families, neighbours and social capital

Families

Most people live close to their extended family: only 16 per cent of people do not have relatives or close friends living within a 15-20 minute journey. You are more likely to live near grandparents if you have younger children between one and four years old. There are also quite stark regional differences, as shown in Figure 1. People living in the north-west or north-east are much more likely to have their parents living nearby than those living in London.

Grandparents

Living near your parents brings with it the possibility of assistance with childcare. Research on a national level has shown that many parents still depend on grandparents for childcare (3) and that a 15 to 20 minute journey is about the maximum distance grandparents will travel to offer daily childcare (4).

But our survey also suggests that these grandparents may help out in other ways and may be the reason why parents in the north-east rely less on their neighbours to water their plants during the holidays (47 per cent) than families in London (60 per cent).

Despite the potential benefits of staying close to one's family, families nowadays are very mobile, whether they live in urban or rural areas. Only five per cent have lived in their current neighbourhood all their lives, and the average time for a family to have lived in one place is seven and a half years. Unsurprisingly, the older the children, the longer families have stayed in one place (Figure 2).

Once in a new area, having children seems to be a good way of making friends and getting to know neighbours. More than two-thirds (70 per cent) of parents in our research said that they have made friends or got to know some people through their children.

Almost half of children (45 per cent) play with their neighbours' children, although a third have never done so. The time when most children seem to play with neighbours' children is when they are aged between five and ten (59 per cent).

"My neighbourhood has a good mix of people of all ages. My neighbours look out for each other without being in each other's pockets – though I do know of people in the area who do spend a lot of time together. In our particular neighbourhood much of the housing is terraced and to a large degree the back gardens are more or less shared, especially as far as children are concerned."

Figure 1: Relatives living within a 15 to 20-minute journey by region

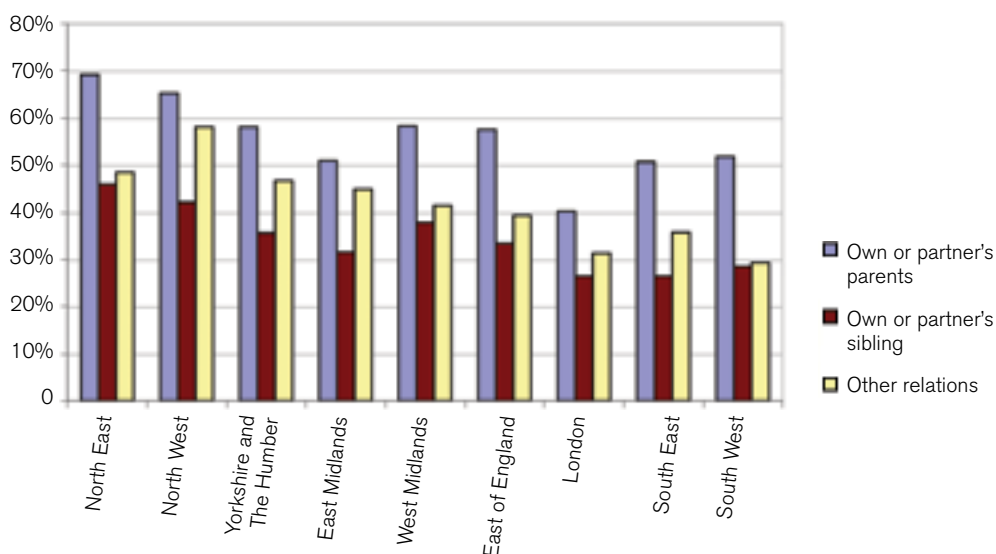
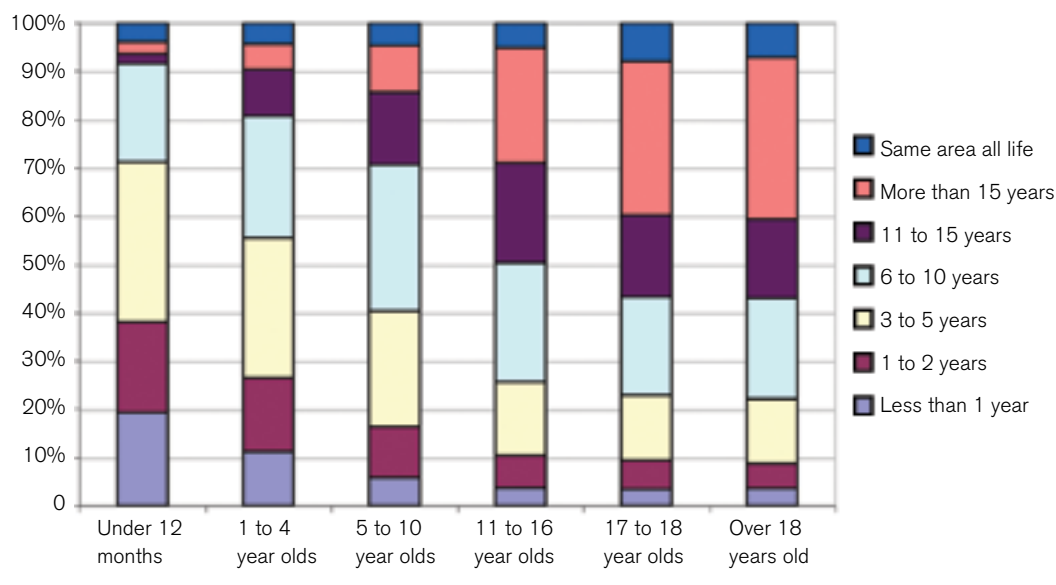


Figure 2: Time parents have lived in current neighbourhood by age of children



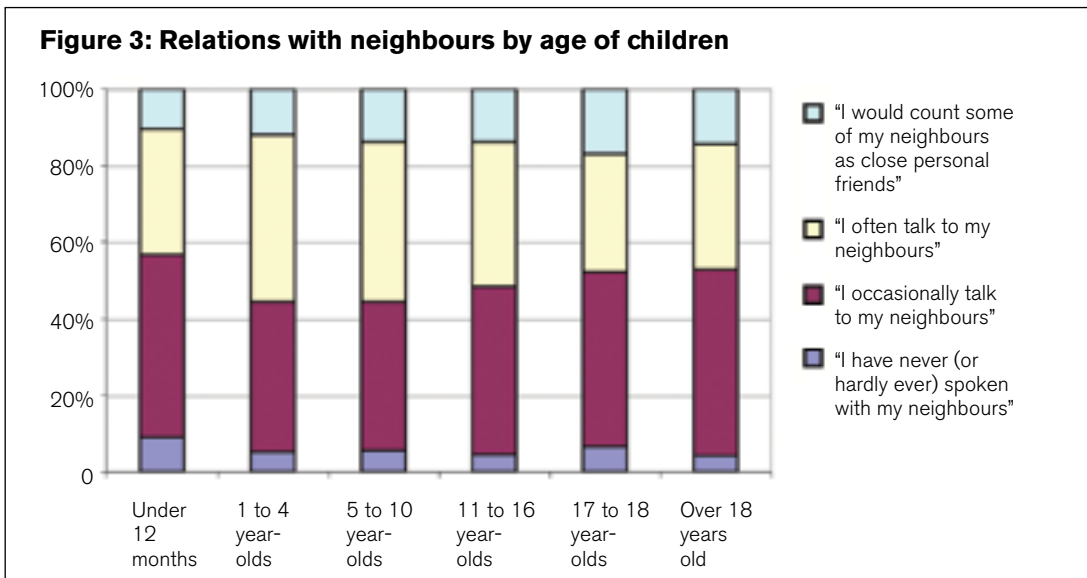
"[There] needs [to be] more community spirit – things to bring people together. A prime example would be a morning group or a cafe at the local park for parents of young children in the area. We don't have the benefit of such a thing as yet."

As Figure 3 shows, only a tiny proportion of families have never spoken to the people who live next door, even if close friendships are rarer.

Neighbours are also there to help: parents in England seem to be prepared to ask

neighbours to lend them a hand. Some 57 per cent would ask their neighbours to help out while they were on holiday, for example by watering plants; some 68 per cent of parents would borrow something off their neighbour; and 70 per cent say their neighbours would help them out in a crisis (e.g. look after their children if they had to go to hospital for a few hours).

As a test of social capital this is not negligible, especially the confidence that neighbours would help you out in a crisis. But what this



general statistic masks is the significant difference in the confidence you have in your neighbours if you are rich or poor. For those with incomes below £10,000, in other words, those most likely to live on council estates and be on benefit, only 50 per cent think their neighbours would help them out in a crisis. This contrasts with 80 per cent of families whose incomes are over £80,000.

If families are in fact neighbourly, does this then translate into being involved in the community? Apparently not, as two-thirds of parents admitted in the survey that they were *not* involved in any neighbourhood activities at all.

This is perhaps where families' high mobility may show a greater effect. Previous research has shown that the shorter the time people live in an area the less buy-in they have to it (5).

The most active time for most parents is when their children are in primary school. In our survey, one in five (21 per cent) parents of five to ten year-olds said they helped out at their local school. This school involvement is another way that parents' own social capital can be increased through their children. However, that level of activity is not mirrored in any other volunteering activity or when their children are any other age.

Contradicting some assumptions about the capital city, it is Londoners who are most likely to be involved in a community activity (44 per cent).

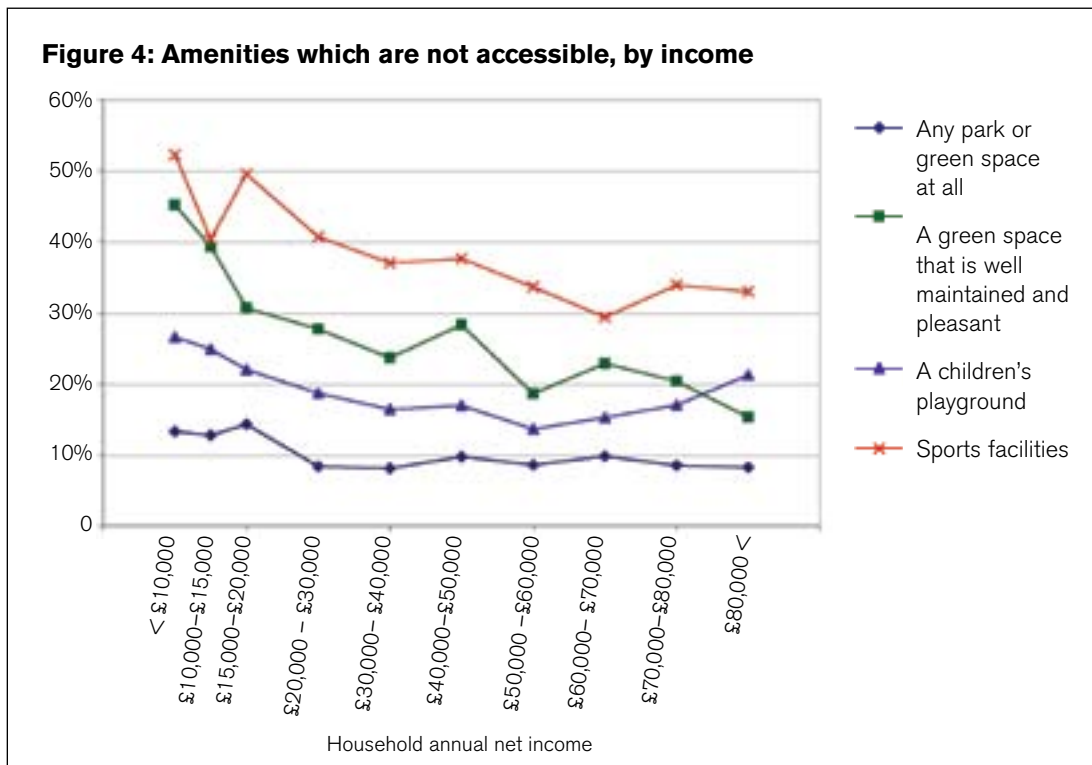
Space for children and families

"My village is very safe, very friendly and the children all play out in our street without fear of any kind of trouble e.g. fast traffic, rowdy teenagers. Compared to some of my friends who live in different areas I consider myself very lucky to be able to afford to live where I do and be able to bring my son up in a safe, healthy environment where he can play out, in safety, all day long like I used to when I was little."

Children's personal development is highly dependent on having space and time for free play (6). The quality of public space is likely to be more important for children from disadvantaged families. These children take part in fewer organised after-school activities and, particularly in urban areas, are less likely to have large private gardens to play in (7). The only outside space parents can let their young children play, if they have no garden, is the street immediately in front of the house or block of flats.

Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of the parents in our survey said that children, either their own or others', tended to play in their street.

Of those who said that children did not play in their street, 41 per cent gave traffic as the main reason. This was also the most common reason given by children in a Play England survey (8).



“Traffic is a huge problem, I live in a side street but it is used as a through road for large heavy vans and lorries that speed through it. This is the reason no one’s children are safe on the streets around my area.”

“Despite a beautiful nearby park, our neighbourhood is not a pleasant place for children. They have no freedom, even on our quiet suburban street cars roar by at high speeds. My older child is not able to go to the park by himself, there are no crossings [...] the kids live in the fug of traffic fumes.”

Street play may also be unpopular with adults. Some parents in our survey complained about the noise made by children playing outside, feeling that these children were not adequately supervised by their parents.

There is also evidence that children benefit particularly from being able to explore the natural world and as a minimum have some green space to play in (6). Encouragingly, in our survey 90 per cent of parents state that they can get to a park or green space easily from their house.

However, as demonstrated in Figure 4, the likelihood of that green space being a pleasant place varies sharply with income: of

those with net household incomes of under £10,000, just under half (45 per cent) do not have access to a green space that is “well maintained and pleasant”.

It can also be seen that families on low incomes are less likely to be able to get to a children’s playground or any sports facility (even ignoring the cost of access). This inequality in access to outdoor space and facilities is very relevant to current Government concern about children’s wellbeing, health and obesity.

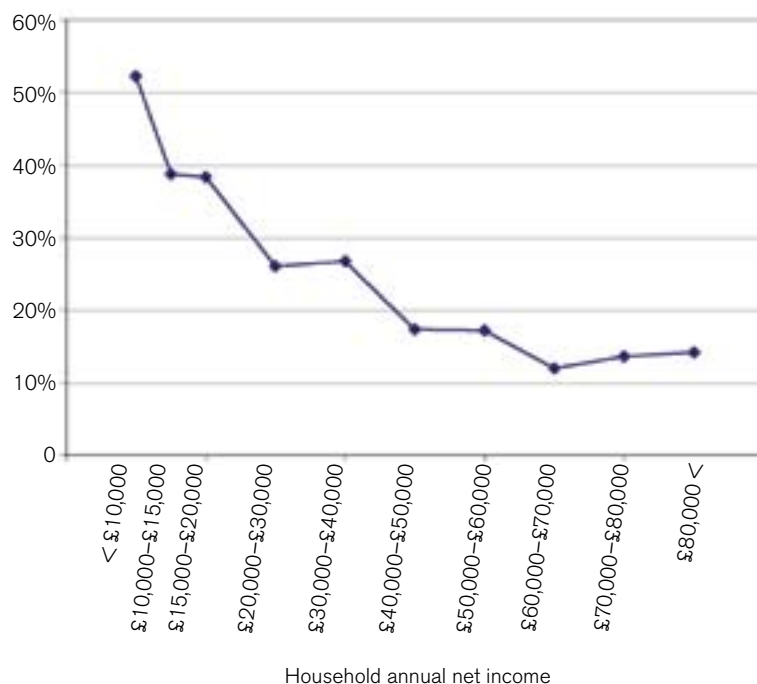
Feeling safe

Most people in England feel that their neighbourhood is safe: 95 per cent of parents surveyed feel safe, or very safe, during the day and 72 per cent at night. Those that feel least safe tend to be poorer people and those in urban areas.

At night, one of the reasons parents feel unsafe is the large groups of young people in public spaces:

“My neighbourhood is quite safe during daytime, the children play on the streets, in each other’s gardens and everyone is very friendly. But when night-time falls the smaller children come in and the teenage

Figure 5: Percentage feeling unsafe after dark, by income



ones come out, congregating in gangs around the local shops (where you are afraid to go at night) swearing, smoking, walking the streets and hanging around the local park (which they vandalise). Turning this nice neighbourhood into a nightmare."

Many of the verbatim comments in our survey paint just this picture: neighbourhoods where families feel safe during the day, but which are transformed into virtual no-go zones at night, where there are few adults and teenagers take over the public space.

Overall, 37 per cent of parents feel that more action on crime and anti-social behaviour is the thing which would most improve their area. The second most popular option (23 per cent) is more organised activities for children and young people, discussed further below.

This concern about teenagers at night contrasts with attitudes towards neighbours' children. For example, most parents would not worry about talking to their neighbours' children if they were being unruly. More than three quarters (77 per cent) said that they would speak to their neighbours' children if they were misbehaving in the neighbourhood or would consider doing so, with only 18 per cent saying they would definitely not do so.

Similarly, neither 'stranger danger' nor older children seem to be a significant reason for children not playing out in the street during the day.

Parents' comments suggest that they do not know the teenagers who hang about the streets in the evenings, and they do not refer to them as being their neighbours' children.

"We live on a lovely estate but just the last few months we have had a crime wave (tyres being stabbed etc.) and noticed gangs of youths who don't even live there."

The ready availability of alcohol to young people contributes to the problem.

"A lot of anti-social behaviour caused primarily by teenagers getting cheap alcohol from off-licences then causing trouble"

"There are too many teenagers hanging around in gangs drinking alcohol, makes you feel uneasy walking past them."

Drunken adults emerging from pubs and clubs can also be seen to pose a threat.

"We are very close to estate pubs that have a lot of trouble with drunken violence to

the extent we have lived there for 15 years but are now moving to get away from it.”

While low-level anti-social behaviour from young people is the most that many areas have to cope with, there are some areas where there are serious drug and alcohol problems involving adults and fuelling higher levels of serious crime.

“Living next door to a drug dealer, we have already experienced police raids, fights in the street all night, taxis on my driveway, one stabbing (in my front garden in front of my son) and one death due to drug and alcohol abuse and the police do nothing to help us.”

Fear of crime and serious anti-social behaviour from both adults and young people is strongly associated with poverty, as shown in Figure 5.

Young people

Young people ‘hanging out’ in large numbers and associated anti-social behaviour is clearly seen as being linked to a lack of organised activities for children and young people. At least one-fifth of respondents from every type of area except the inner city said providing more activities for young people was what would most improve their neighbourhood. It is clearly an issue for parents and young people wherever they live.

Only 60 per cent of parents said that they could easily access a sports facility; in rural areas only 49 per cent said that they could. However, respondents were not asked about the cost of the facilities which can be a major barrier to all but the most affluent young people.

“The park near me is very run down and it would be nice if my eldest son had something to do of any evening with his friends outside of the house.”

“There is little to do that is cheap enough for most children.”

“Youth schemes need to be in place to occupy teenagers rather than simply complaining at having them hang about. They need somewhere to go they can be themselves without people thinking they’re

up to no good by just hanging on the street corners.”

Research with young people themselves confirms that they do feel a lack of welcoming places to go and activities which are accessible and affordable (9).

Schools

Although 66 per cent of parents overall are confident in the quality of their local state school and 71 per cent are or would be happy to send their children there, nearly a quarter (23 per cent) would not. The situation is much worse in London. Only 52 per cent of parents living in the capital said that they were confident in the quality of their local state school, with 59 per cent happy to send their children there. In the north east on the other hand, the figures are 73 per cent and 77 per cent respectively.

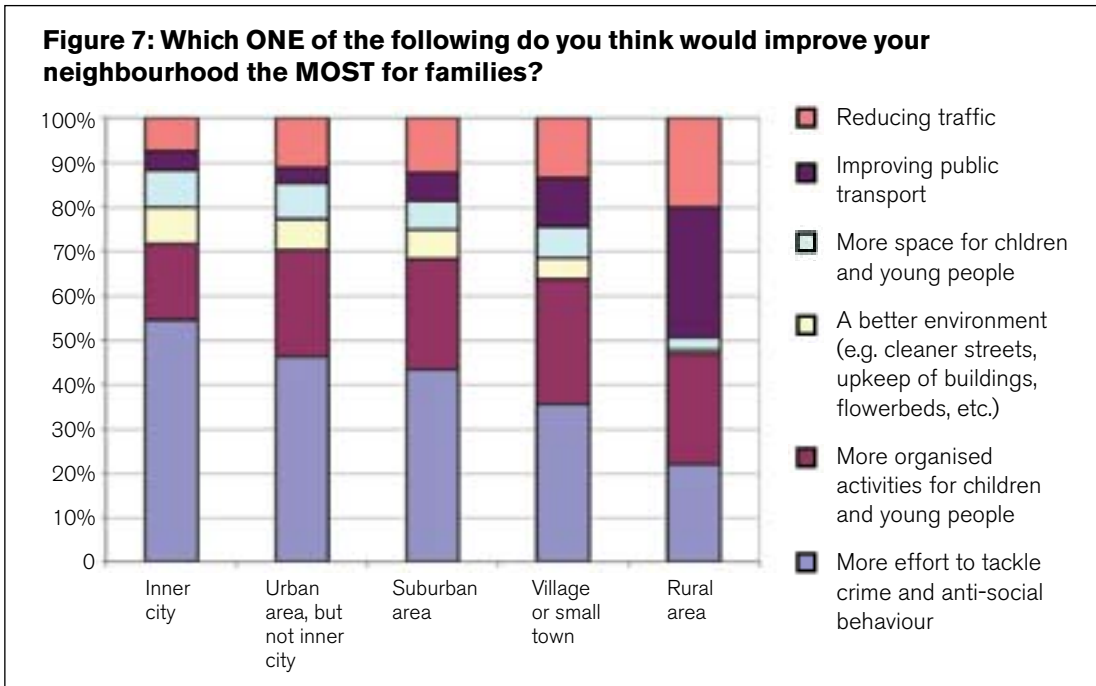
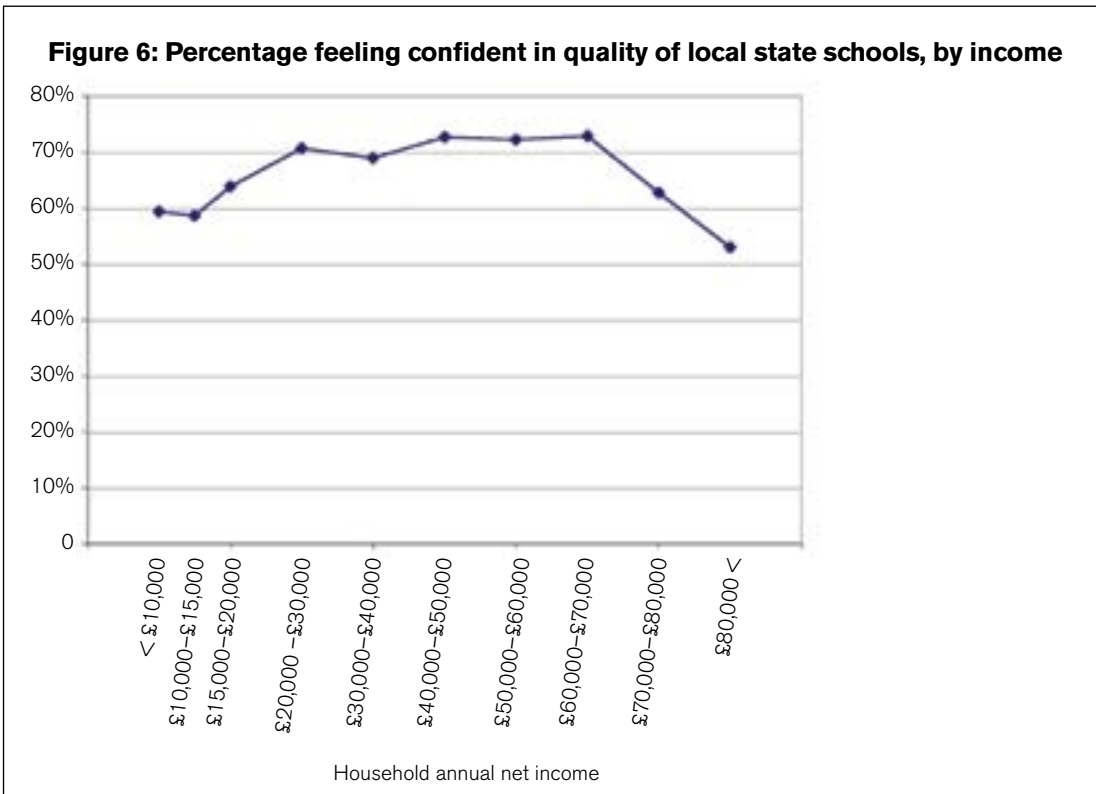
People in lower income brackets are less likely to be happy about sending their children to their local state school. There is some evidence to suggest that schools in poorer areas may be of lower quality (10). Richer parents in London are more likely to be able to exercise choice and send their children to schools outside their local area (11).

Confidence in local schools is also generally low amongst those in the highest income brackets, who can afford to send their children to private school.

The rural-urban divide

The priorities for families in rural and more urban areas differ markedly (Figure 7). In inner cities, other urban areas and suburbs, more effort to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour would be the most popular single action (50 per cent, 43 per cent and 40 per cent respectively). This is a lower priority, although still significant, in small towns/villages and rural areas (32 per cent and 19 per cent).

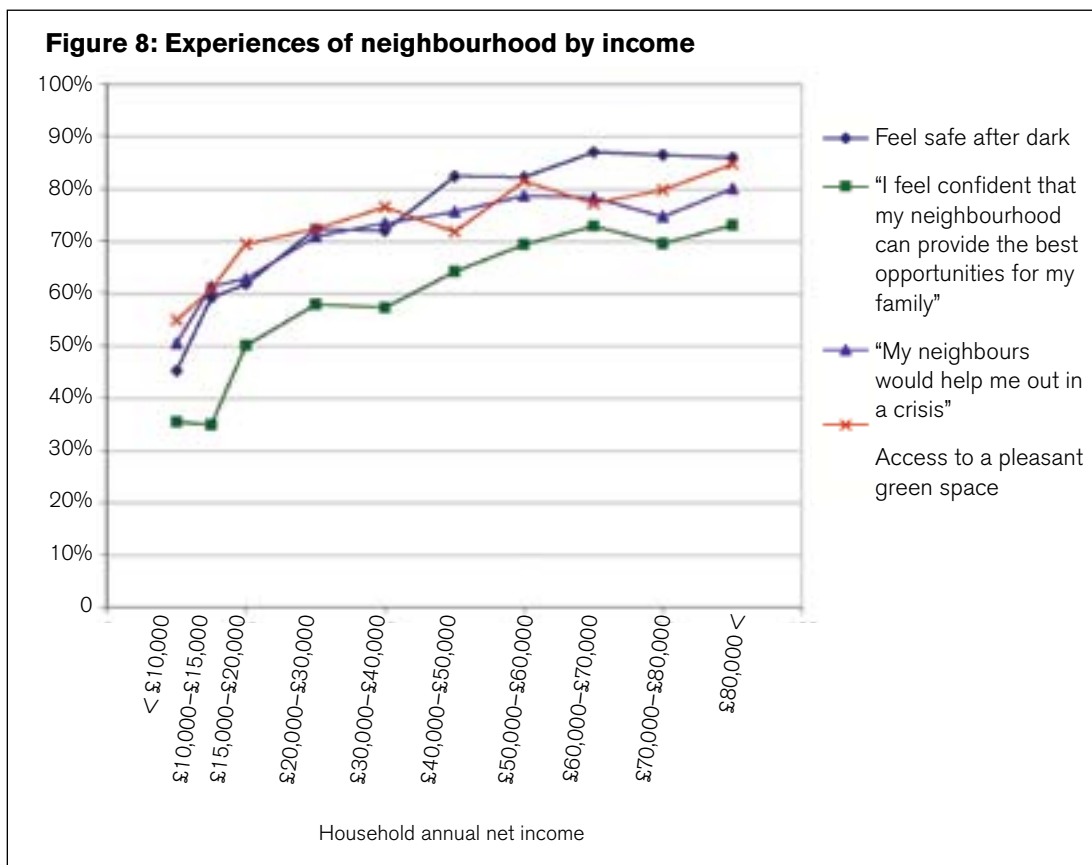
Poor public transport is seen as a significant problem in rural areas where a quarter of respondents chose it as their priority for improvement. The availability of public transport also determines whether children



and young people have access to any activities outside school (9).

Perhaps surprisingly, the less urban someone's neighbourhood, the more likely they were to choose reducing traffic as a priority (7 per cent from the inner city, 12 per cent from suburbs or small towns, and 17 per cent in rural areas).

“As a rural area many of the questions do not fit well with the area. Our issues are about isolation and lack of access to such things as post offices, schools, libraries, shops, petrol stations, TV, radio, telephone, internet and not crime and disorder, open spaces, etc.”



"We live in a village but its pubs attract young people who get drunk then vandalise it...including my house. The roads through the village are far too dangerous for young kids to play on."

Poverty

As we have seen throughout this report, it is poverty which is the most likely marker for parents' dissatisfaction with their neighbourhood.

In the whole of England just over half (56 per cent) of parents have confidence that their neighbourhood can provide the best opportunities for their family. The richer parents are, the more able they are to pay to ensure these opportunities, by moving if necessary. The gap is huge: while 73 per cent of the richest parents say they can do the best for their family in their neighbourhood, only 35 per cent of the poorest believe the same.

It is the very poorest people too who are much less likely to say that neighbours would help them out in a crisis, feel safe after dark or have confidence in their local school. They are also less likely to live near

a well-maintained green space and be able to get to a children's playground or sports facility (Figure 8).

Policy Recommendations

- ◆ Any strategy to reduce inequalities will need to focus not just on individuals and families, but on whole communities and the problems they face.
- ◆ There should be more activities available to all young people and more creative ways of engaging them. As well as the direct benefits for young people, this will mean that they do not occupy the streets at night to the exclusion of parents and other members of the community. Already the Government has promised a youth centre in every community and local authorities now have a statutory duty to provide positive activities for young people. However, there should also be efforts to bridge gaps between parents, teenagers and other members of the community in local planning.
- ◆ Investment is needed to ensure poorer families have access to well-maintained

green spaces. This may mean exploring ways of keeping space safe and free from vandalism, perhaps using park keepers and secure gates.

- ◆ Local sports and leisure facilities need to be affordable for the least well-off.
- ◆ More needs to be done to tackle anti-social behaviour – particularly in poorer areas where it has a disproportionate effect. The Government has promised to make this a top priority, but research is needed into what works. The Public Accounts Committee report this year into tackling anti-social behaviour criticises the lack of any national evaluation of the effectiveness of the different anti-social behaviour interventions.
- ◆ New and innovative solutions need to be found to reduce traffic and improve public transport in rural areas, as families living in these areas are affected disproportionately.
- ◆ Neighbourhood planning should take account of families and their needs – providing safe green spaces, areas where pedestrians have as much priority as cars, good and cheap public transport links, and access to good local schools and safe places for young people to go after school and in the holidays.
- ◆ National policy must consider the very differing needs of families in deprived inner city areas and isolated rural ones.

"I am very lucky to live in an old fashioned cul-de-sac, where we all know our neighbours, and can even leave our door unlocked. We all look out for each other's children, and actively seek to keep our street clean and safe. We have a well-established residents' association, and work actively with local charities and other groups to help to eradicate all trouble within our streets, and to improve the look of the close, with planting and mural paintings."

There is no doubt that many neighbourhoods in England are safe and pleasant places to live and that society is less atomised than might be expected from media reports.

Nevertheless, the richer you are the more likely you are to live in a good neighbourhood with good amenities and little anti-social behaviour.

Being poor means being less able to escape from areas with a high crime rate and few amenities – and may even mean having less confidence in the kindness of neighbours.

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