

A new approach to 'dysfunctional' Britain

Iain Duncan Smith MP outlines the proposals of the Social Justice Policy Group to address the problems of social breakdown in the UK.

The connection between crime and dysfunctional upbringing becomes clear when one looks at the type of person in prison today. Two thirds come from broken homes, between two thirds and three quarters suffer from drug abuse and alcohol addiction, one third were in care as children, they have the average reading and numerate age of a child of eleven and a third suffer from mental health problems. This is even more worrying when one realises that a third of prisoners were in care, but only 0.6% of the population have ever been in care. It's also worth reminding ourselves that well over 90% of all prisoners are men.

While the short-term solution to crime is focused on endlessly, with frequent debates about prison and punishment, not enough time is spent committing to a longer term programme to reduce this dysfunctionality which is peculiarly prevalent in the UK.

In July the Social Justice Policy Group I chaired published its final report: 'Breakthrough Britain'. It contains detailed proposals to tackle many of Britain's most acute social problems, namely family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependency, addictions and serious personal debt. These social problems are the background of the typical prisoner. There was also a focus on how the voluntary sector could be helped to provide second chances to vulnerable people. As chairman of the Social Justice Policy Group I ensured that the Group's full independence was guarded throughout; indeed many members were academics and practitioners with no party allegiance.

There is now overwhelming evidence that the cycle of disadvantage starts very early in vulnerable young lives. A lack of nurture in the first 36 months can have lifelong consequences for mental health. Parents from dysfunctional families often struggle to provide this, perpetuating disadvantage. To help address this, family services hubs should be created at the heart of communities to enhance current provision. Such hubs would emphasise support for parents in the children's first three years, preventing dysfunction in very young children's cognitive and emotional development.

Intensive home-visiting programmes should be implemented as a matter of priority. The Nurse Family Partnership, developed by Professor David Olds of the University of Colorado and now in use in more than 280 US counties, demonstrates what the best early intervention can achieve. This home-visiting programme was developed by Olds in the 1970s following his work in a day care centre in Baltimore. The care four-year-olds were receiving there was considered to be too little too late. To achieve desired outcomes, Olds believed parents and children should be engaged much earlier. He therefore developed a programme targeting low income first-time mothers who received visits from a registered nurse from pregnancy until the child reached two. The programme aims to help women improve their prenatal health. It improves the care provided to infants and toddlers,

enhancing the children's health and development. Mothers are encouraged to gain qualifications and prepare for work.

A follow-up study in New York State showed that 15-year-olds whose disadvantaged families had gone through the programme had, in contrast to those in a comparison group, 60% fewer instances of running away; 56% fewer days of alcohol consumption; 56% fewer arrests and 81% fewer convictions. Although initially expensive, in the US the cost of the programme was recovered by the first child's fourth birthday, with further substantial savings over the participating children's lifetimes - \$5 for every \$1 spent.

Although government has spent vast sums on early years through Sure Start, help for young mums has not been sufficiently well targeted or provided early enough. The government is now piloting Nurse Family Partnerships in ten areas of England. However, given the strong evidence base we should have seen the programme adopted much earlier. It is vital that it is rolled-out across the country at the earliest opportunity.

To help parents spend time caring for their children in the early years when attachment and intensive support are most important, one proposal is to give parents the option of front-loading child benefit. A larger proportion of a child's total entitlement would be available during the first three years. This would help relieve the financial pressure that forces many mothers to work when they would prefer to stay at home. To ensure that this extra benefit does not exacerbate the effects of poor parenting, some conditionality would be attached, providing an opportunity to address deficits in nurture and care by helping struggling parents. For a small proportion of families, receipt of front-loaded child benefit might be dependent on participation and completion of Nurse Family Partnership-type programmes.

Tackling Britain's appalling rates of educational failure could also have a big impact in helping reduce crime rates. One in ten young people leave school with no qualifications and 44,000 leave school each year functionally illiterate. Unsurprisingly, there is a strong correlation between crime and educational failure - 73% of young offenders describe their academic attainment as nil. Of course correlation does not prove causation; each aspect of breakdown addressed by the Group reinforces and contributes to the others. However it is reasonable to assume that more successful engagement of disadvantaged young people in school would help them avoid the conveyor belt to crime that often begins with disengagement and truancy.

Parents who have had a negative experience of education often lack the motivation or ability to support their children at school. To help counter this, the Group recommends the introduction of 'be a credit to your child' courses. These would help parents to get the best out of the education system for their children. It is also recommended that primary schools in hard-pressed areas employ their own full-time 'home-school



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champions' to improve links between parents and schools, helping parents improve their children's attendance, attainment and behaviour. Five hundred pounds per annum educational credits for disadvantaged children would help them fulfil their potential, paying for a year's extra maths tuition or six months intensive literacy support.

Intensive help for disadvantaged families during children's early years and better support to enable vulnerable young people to do well at school would both help to reduce crime. However they must be accompanied by measures to make families stronger and more stable. Family breakdown, the Group concluded, is the single most important factor perpetuating social breakdown and the crime accompanying it. Crime is strongly correlated with family breakdown. Seventy per cent of young offenders are from lone parent families.

As children generally do best when they are brought up by both their parents, government has a responsibility to support the aspiration of most adults to come together and stay together. Almost half (43%) of cohabiting couples will split by their first child's fifth birthday, compared to less than one in 12 married parents. In its focus on improving the quality of parenting relationships, government has almost completely neglected any efforts to help parent couples improve the quality of their relationships and avoid breakdown. This has contributed to the collapse in marriage and committed relationships in many low-income communities, leaving many children and couples with no role model of permanence or exclusivity. High expectations of relationships are matched by low capacities to manage them well.

To help improve the quality of family relationships, the Group proposes a national relationship and parenting education 'invitation' scheme for couples and parents at key life stages. These universal and targeted services to access vulnerable families would reach 800,000 families every year once full capacity is reached. Evidence from US programmes suggests high take up could be achieved. A hundred thousand people have completed marriage and relationship education programmes

in Oklahoma since 2001 with positive effects including lower levels of conflict, higher satisfaction and lower risk of divorce. Counter-intuitively, younger and lower income couples offered the course were more – not less – likely to report an interest in relationship education.

To strengthen families through the tax and benefits system, two main reforms are proposed. The first is to reform the tax credits system to reduce its incentives to lone parenthood. Under the present system, a couple receives the same level of Working Tax Credit as a lone parent. The couple element of Working Tax Credit should therefore be enhanced so that all couples receive the same ratio of support to lone parents

as they currently get in income support, taking into account the additional adult. This measure would both contribute to stability (marriage is almost always preceded by cohabitation) and alleviate poverty (60% of families in poverty are headed by couples).

To recognise, reward and encourage the extra benefits and stability brought to society by healthy marriages, the Group recommends introducing a transferable tax allowance for all married couples. This would cost £3.2 billion and give £20 a week to those eligible, making it easier for one parent to stay at home in the early years of a child's life or care for an elderly relative.

Strengthening families is at the heart of the Group's approach to fixing Britain's broken society. However, it will not have the desired impact unless all the other aspects of breakdown – drug and alcohol abuse, worklessness and dependency, failed education and serious personal debt – are tackled simultaneously with the same vigour. The economic costs of crime in Britain today are at least £60 billion per annum. Of course the measures outlined to provide intensive support in the early years; help for vulnerable children to thrive in school, and strengthen families would require significant investment. In too many communities, children grow up without ever seeing a positive male role model in their lives. For too many the alternative – the gang leader or the drug dealer become instead the role model which means that their route to crime is assured. Unless we want to see that repeated with growing regularity, then we have to deal with it now. Being tough on the causes of crime is long term and much more than just a sound bite.

Iain Duncan Smith was Chair of the Social Justice Policy Group and is MP for Chingford and Woodford Green.

To download Breakthrough Britain, visit www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk.