The Troubled Families Programme: the perfect social policy?

Stephen Crossley

No social policy can expect to achieve a 100 per cent success rate and yet, according to government, the Troubled Families Programme has achieved almost exactly that. The programme has apparently turned around the lives of some of the most disadvantaged and excluded families in a remarkably short period of time. All of this has occurred against a backdrop of cuts to local services and welfare reforms which have hit, not just families, but also the organisations and councils that deliver services to them. This briefing paper traces the history of the programme and questions claims of success made by government and their problematic use of data. Quite simply, the reported successes of the Troubled Families Programme are too good to be true and require closer public and political scrutiny than they have received to date.

A programme targeted at 100,000 'never worked' families was established by the coalition government in 2010 (Cameron, 2010), headed up on an unpaid, voluntary basis by Emma Harrison, the Chief Executive of the welfare-to-work charity A4E. This Big Society project, called *Working Families Everywhere*, was based on volunteers, including government ministers 'adopting' 'workless' families and supporting them to find employment. Following the riots in 2011, a new government initiative, the Troubled Families Programme (TFP), was announced, which set out to 'turn around' the 120,000 most 'troubled families' in England by May 2015. The second phase of the TFP is now underway, following the 'successful' completion of Phase 1. The 'massive expansion' of the programme, to include 400,000 more 'troubled families', with wider-ranging criteria for inclusion, was announced in July 2013, when only 1 per cent of 'troubled families' had been 'turned around'.

The 2014 Budget announced an acceleration of the TFP, expanding early to start working with up to 40,000 of the additional families in 2014/15, a year earlier than planned (HM Treasury, 2014). A document setting out the government's priorities for the 2015 Spending Review and, more specifically, how plans to deliver £20 billion of savings will be developed, states that the government will continue to support the TFP 'and similar cross-cutting initiatives that generate efficiencies and bring together public services at local level' (HM Treasury, 2015).

David Cameron recently announced that he is keen to see the 'troubled families' approach extended to different service areas, such as child protection, and the government is committed to exploring ways of extending the approach to 'troubled' households without children (Cameron, 2015). These developments, before any findings from the independent evaluation have been published, are a cause for concern, as are many other aspects of the TFP.

> *Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies.*
> Sir Ernest Benn

The Troubled Families Programme to date

Concerns about a small hard-core of 'troublemakers' or 'neighbours from hell' have periodically resurfaced over the last 100 years (Welshman, 2013). Most recently, a concern about 'chaotic', 'dysfunctional' or 'problem' families associated with the anti-social behaviour and Respect agendas of the Labour governments of the early 2000s, has morphed into a Conservative-led policy about 'troubled families' in England. The TFP only operates in England and the devolved administrations do not have similar national approaches.

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'Troubled Families' in context - the long history of the 'underclass' thesis

- In Victorian times there was a concern about a 'social residuum', and shortly afterwards it was 'unemployables' who were the target of social reformers and politicians.
- The Eugenics Society was influential in promoting the 'social problem group' in the 1930s and the idea of 'problem families' in the years following the Second World War.
- In the 1960s, Oscar Lewis, the cultural anthropologist, popularised the heavily racialised 'culture of poverty' theory in the USA.
- Sir Keith Joseph, former Conservative MP, raised the issue of a 'cycle of deprivation' in the 1970s.
- In the 1980s and 1990s, American academic Charles Murray suggested that a 'plague' had crossed the Atlantic in the form of an 'underclass'.
- New Labour expressed concern about 2.5% of people who were 'socially excluded' in the late 1990s and early 2000s.
- The development of the Respect agenda in the 2000s raised the issue of 'problem families' once again.

These ideas have flourished, despite no robust evidence which supports the idea of an 'underclass', whatever it is called. Professor David Gordon, who led the recent *Poverty and Social Exclusion in the United Kingdom* study, the largest ever research project of its kind, has offered the following view of such concepts:

These ideas are unsupported by any substantial body of evidence. Despite almost 150 years of scientific investigation, often by extremely partisan investigators, not a single study has ever found any large group of people/households with any behaviours that could be ascribed to a culture or genetics of poverty ... any policy based on the idea that there are a group of 'Problem Families' who 'transmit' their 'poverty/deprivation' to their children will inevitably fail, as this idea is a prejudice, unsupported by scientific evidence.
(Gordon, 2011)

The 2011 Riots

The concept of 'troubled families' came into the public consciousness in the aftermath of the English riots in 2011. In his 'fightback after the riots' speech delivered a week after the riots had ended, Cameron (2011a) stated that:

And we need more urgent action, too, on the families that some people call 'problem', others call 'troubled'. The ones that everyone in their neighbourhood knows and often avoids. Last December I asked Emma Harrison to develop a plan to help get these families on track ...

Now that the riots have happened I will make sure that we clear away the red tape and the bureaucratic wrangling, and put rocket boosters under this programme, with a clear ambition that within the lifetime of this Parliament we will turn around the lives of the 120,000 most troubled families in the country.

Structural factors, such as poverty and racial inequality and injustice, were eschewed as possible factors behind the riots in favour of an explanation of 'pure criminality'. Rioters were, in Cameron's words, 'people with a twisted moral code, people with a complete absence of self-restraint'. The blame for the riots, in the governments' eyes, was split between poor parenting and anti-social families, and an overly generous welfare system that encouraged delinquency:

I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home. Perhaps they come from one of the neighbourhoods where it's standard for children to have a mum and not a dad...where it's normal for young men to grow up without a male role model, looking to the streets for their father figures, filled up with rage and anger ...

For years we've had a system that encourages the worst in people - that incites laziness, that excuses bad behaviour, that erodes self-discipline, that discourages hard work, above all that drains responsibility away from people.

In December 2011, the TFP was launched to help realise Cameron's ambition to 'turn round' the lives of the 120,000 'troubled families' by May 2015, the end of the term of parliament. In contrast to the *Working Families Everywhere* scheme, which quietly faded away following Emma Harrison's decision to step down from her voluntary role amidst allegations of fraud at A4E, the TFP

The TFP then, was a policy response designed to not just address the problems caused by 'troubled families', but to also completely change the way the state interacted with them

was very much a government-led initiative, with local authorities enlisted to deliver the programme.

Louise Casey, the former head of the Anti-Social Behaviour Unit under the previous Labour administration, was appointed to head up the Troubled Families Unit, based in the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in Whitehall. Speaking at the launch of the programme, Cameron (2011b) stated that he wanted to be clear about what he meant by the phrase 'troubled families':

> *Officialdom might call them 'families with multiple disadvantages'. Some in the press might call them 'neighbours from hell'. Whatever you call them, we've known for years that a relatively small number of families are the source of a large proportion of the problems in society. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations.*

The theme of the failure of services and state support to address the behaviour of 'troubled families' continued:

> *...troubled families are already pulled and prodded and poked a dozen times a week by government. Indeed one of the reasons for their dysfunction is their hatred of 'the system' which they experience as faceless, disjointed and intrusive.*

The TFP then, was a policy response designed to not just address the problems caused by 'troubled families', but to also completely change the way the state interacted with them. Local authorities were expected to deliver the programme using a 'family intervention' approach (DCLG, 2012a) which had been rolled out to 53 areas in England under the previous Labour government's Respect agenda. This approach sees a single 'persistent, assertive and challenging' (ibid) key worker working intensively with the family 'from the inside out' to address their problems, encouraging them to take responsibility for their circumstances.

The Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) have their recent roots in a single Intensive Family Support Project (IFSP) established by the children's charity Action for Children in Dundee in 1996. The journey from a single Scottish voluntary sector project to an English government initiative was accompanied by a change in rhetoric which privileged *intervention* over support, and which advocated for sanctions to be used in cases where families did not voluntarily comply with workers (Nixon et al., 2010).

First definitions

The government announced that there were 120,000 'troubled families' in England, based on research published in 2007 on families with multiple disadvantages (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007), and published indicative numbers of 'troubled families' in each local authority area. 'Troubled families' were officially defined as those who met three of the four following criteria:

- Are involved in youth crime or anti-social behaviour
- Have children who are regularly truanting or not in school
- Have an adult on out of work benefits
- Cause high costs to the taxpayer

(DCLG, 2012b)

The first three criteria were set by central government, whilst the fourth criteria ('cause high costs to the taxpayer') allowed each local authority to use local discretion to work with families they wanted to work with and 'make up the numbers'. All 152 local authorities in England 'signed up' to take part in the TFP which was to be run on a Payment by Results basis, with local authorities paid an attachment fee for each 'troubled family' they worked with, and a further allocation of funding dependent on certain outcomes being met. Families were deemed to have been 'turned around' if:

1. Educational attendance improved above 85%, youth crime reduced by 33% and anti-social behaviour reduced by 60% across the family, or
2. A family member moved off out-of-work benefits and into continuous employment for three or six months, depending on the benefits they were initially receiving (ibid)

Claims for 'turning around' 'troubled families' were submitted by local authorities on a quarterly basis. These figures were then published by the DCLG as progress reports. Whilst concerns were raised by the National Audit Office about the ability of local authorities to 'turn around' all of the 120,000 families in time to meet Cameron's deadline (National Audit Office, 2013), the government and Louise Casey remained confident throughout that the target would be met.

In July 2013, the 'massive expansion' of the TFP was announced, including funding of £200 million (DCLG, 2013a), shortly before a Comprehensive Spending Review which saw £2.1 billion cut from local authority budgets (Butler, 2013). The expansion would see 400,000 'high risk

families' worked with in a similar way to the original 'troubled families'. In August 2014, further detail was announced on the expansion of the programme and the phrase 'high risk families' was dropped. The 'new' 'troubled families' were families that met two out of the following six criteria:

- Parents and children involved in crime or anti-social behaviour
- Children who have not been attending school regularly
- Children who need help
- Adults out of work or at risk of financial exclusion and young people at risk of worklessness
- Families affected by domestic violence and abuse
- Parents and children with a range of health problems (DCLG, 2014a)

The new figure of 400,000 more 'troubled families' equates to around 6.5 per cent of all families in England (DCLG, 2014b), and the substantial discretion afforded to local authorities in interpreting and applying the criteria, means that almost any family who comes into contact with, or is referred to, a non-universal service could fall into the category of 'troubled'. In the same month that this detail was announced, Louise Casey wrote to local authority chief executives to inform them of 'thresholds for eligibility' for taking part in Phase 2 of the programme, effectively letting them know that if they didn't meet the timetable laid down by the Prime Minister, they may be barred from taking part in the second phase of the programme.

In May 2015, the government published figures that showed that local authorities had 'turned around' 99 per cent of 'troubled families' (DCLG, 2015a). David Cameron called it a 'real government success' and announced that he was looking to expand the approach to other areas, such as child protection. This announcement was widely covered in national media, but scrutiny of the claims was largely absent, with only the website of *The Guardian* highlighting that the figures sounded too good to be true (Butler, 2015).

Ten reasons for concern

The TFP has received little critical attention in political and media circles to date. Politicians from across the political spectrum have attempted to align themselves with the success of the programme. When scrutiny is applied to different aspects of the programme, a number of inconsistencies can be found. These relate not only to the performance of the programme, but also to the rationale behind it.

Rationale for the Troubled Families Programme

1 The figure of 120,000 'troubled families'

In 2007, the Social Exclusion Task Force published a report – Families at Risk – examining families who were experiencing multiple disadvantages. This research drew on data from the 2004/05 Families and Children Study and estimated that there were 140,000 families in Britain with five out of seven disadvantages. The disadvantages were:

- No parent in the family is in work
- Family lives in poor-quality or overcrowded housing
- No parent has any qualifications
- Mother has mental health problems
- At least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity
- Family has low income (below 60% of the median)
- Family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items. (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007)

The figure of 140,000 across the whole of Britain was subsequently rounded down to 120,000 families in England. Professor Ruth Levitas argued that the government misrepresented the research and, 'in the term "troubled families", it deliberately conflates families experiencing multiple disadvantage and families that cause trouble' as part of a strategy that was 'successful in feeding vindictive attitudes to the poor' (Levitas, 2012).

2 The evidence base for the Family Intervention Project model

The evidence base for the family intervention model is similarly weak, despite a number of commissioned government evaluations. The idea that 'family intervention' alone can 'turn around' the lives of 'troubled families' does not stand up to close scrutiny. The most recent evaluation of FIPs (Department for Education, 2011) states that, 'There is limited evidence that ASB FIPs generate better outcomes than other non-FIP interventions on family functioning or health issues, although FIPs do appear to be at least as effective as these alternatives'. Around one third of families saw no reduction in crime or anti-social behaviour as a result of involvement with FIPs,

and around half of families saw no improvement in parenting, drug or alcohol misuse, truancy or school exclusion. Four out of five families saw no change in their work status as a result of FIP involvement. There is also very little evidence that any of the positive outcomes are sustained following the withdrawal of intensive support. The best that can be said of the family intervention approach, is that it appears to work for some families in some areas of their lives, at least for the time they are supported by a key worker. Professor David Gregg has called the family intervention approach 'a classic case of policy-based evidence' (Gregg, 2010).

3 Had nothing worked with these families before?

It has been argued that the TFP is needed because previous approaches, and ways of working with 'troubled' or 'chaotic' or 'dysfunctional' families, have all failed. This view ignores the fact that there is no evidence that families 'transmit' their problems from one generation to the next. There are some continuities within families, but there are also many discontinuities, and many children of 'troubled families' do not end up leading troubled lives. Similarly, lots of children from very settled, stable family backgrounds end up experiencing severe disadvantage or being 'troubled' in later life, for a variety of reasons.

All that is required for many 'troubled families' to be 'turned around' is for one of the adults to enter employment and we know that long-term unemployment is very rare. The idea of families where 'three generations have never worked' is a myth (Shildrick et al., 2012). Only a tiny number of families (less than 0.5 per cent) exist where two generations have never worked (Macmillan, 2011). Independent analysis also suggests that the number of families in England experiencing multiple disadvantages ebbed and flowed between 130,000 and 110,000 between 2003 and 2008, long before the TFP started (Reed, 2012).

4 How 'troublesome' are 'troubled families'?

In contrast to the image of 'troubled families' as 'neighbours from hell' where drug and alcohol addictions, crime and irresponsibility 'cascade through generations', an interim report from the national evaluation of the TFP (DCLG, 2014b) shows that in 'troubled families':

- 85% 'had no adults with a criminal offence in the previous six months
- 97% had children with one or zero offences in the previous six months
- 58% had no police callouts in the previous six months
- 84% had children who were not permanently excluded from school
- 26% had at least one adult in work
- 77% did not have any young people classified as 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training)
- 78% were not at risk of eviction for any reason
- 77% did not have any children identified as being children in need
- 95% had no family members identified as being Prolific and Priority Offenders (PPO)
- 89% had no adult subject to an anti-social behaviour intervention
- 93% had no adults clinically diagnosed as being dependent on alcohol

The only characteristics shared by the majority of 'troubled families' are that they are white, not in work, live in social housing and have at least one household member experiencing poor health, illness and/or a disability. Crime, anti-social behaviour and substance abuse, even at relatively low levels, are all characteristics which relate to small minorities of official 'troubled families'.

5 The cost of £9 billion

Given that the data collected from 'troubled families' engaging in the programme suggests that the overwhelming majority of them do not match the stereotype of hardened criminal families who terrorise their neighbourhoods with children never at school and parents who have never worked, it is worth considering whether they really do cost the state £9 billion as the Prime Minister suggested at the launch of the TFP. The original figure of £9 billion came from the Department for Education's research on the 120,000 families with multiple disadvantages and some family intervention data (DCLG, 2013b). The cost of a smaller group of 46,000 families, with five or more disadvantages *and* a child or children with 'multiple behavioural problems' (defined as having all of the following characteristics: being in trouble with the police; having run away from home; having been expelled or suspended from school; and having a statement of special need), was estimated at £4 billion, and this was then extrapolated to £9 billion for 120,000 'troubled families'.

When DCLG published their own data (ibid) on how the £9 billion cost was estimated, they suggested that

providing evidence for the policy being pursued was the most important factor in compiling the figures:

> *While the figures in this analysis are significant and informed government's decision-making process, the critical point for the Government was not necessarily the precise figure, but whether a sufficiently compelling case for a new approach was made.*

The success of the Troubled Families Programme

6 Is the Troubled Families Programme a perfect social policy?

The 99 per cent success rate of the programme (DCLG, 2015a) is, in social policy terms, unbelievable. Local authorities, which have been hit by cuts and lost large numbers of staff, have allegedly 'turned around' almost the exact number of 'troubled families' they were required to work with, at a time when those families will potentially have suffered as a result of austerity policies, cuts to local authority services and welfare reforms. No social policy can expect to be 100 per cent successful, especially one involving some of the most disadvantaged families whilst tied to such a short timescale. Local authorities were informed in 2014 that they would not be eligible to take part in the expanded Phase 2 of the TFP if they could not satisfy the Troubled Families Unit in the DCLG that they would 'turn around' all of their families in the timescale set by the Prime Minister. Many local authorities have 'turned around' some of their 'troubled families' not through 'family intervention' work but through data matching exercises. This process, which requires further investigation, involves using available crime and community safety, education and employment data to claim success for families who may have been eligible for the TFP at some stage, but who 'turned themselves around', without the support of a key worker associated with the TFP.

7 Have families' lives really been 'turned around'?

When many 'troubled families' experience unemployment and poor health, and some of them also experience issues such as domestic violence, it is unclear to what extent their lives will have been 'turned around' by the programme. Only 10 per cent of all 'turned around' families gained work (DWP have estimated a 'non-intervention' rate of 28 per cent for the wider population – this is the percentage of people out of work who would move into work without any additional support) and, as noted above, no detail is known about the quality or security of that work. Changes to educational attendance and anti-social behaviour/crime levels within households accounted for around 90 per cent of the 'turned around' families, but government figures show that the majority of 'troubled families' had children who were already attending school and were not committing large amounts of crime or anti-social behaviour on entry into the programme (DCLG, 2014b). We do not know how many 'turned around' families are still experiencing domestic violence, poor mental health or other issues such as poor quality or overcrowded housing, poverty or material deprivation, because this information has not been reported by the government.

At present, we are also not aware of whether the families consider their lives to have been 'turned around' by their involvement with the programme, or whether their lives remained 'turned around' after the intensive support was withdrawn. It should also be noted that many families will not know that they have been labelled as 'troubled families' because many local authorities choose not to inform them of this and use different names for their local programmes.

8 Are there 400,000 'new' 'troubled families'?

In June 2013, the government announced the expansion of the TFP to include 400,000 'high risk' families (DCLG, 2013a). At the time, no information was provided on the criteria for being a 'high risk' family or on the methodology used to arrive at the figure of 400,000. In August 2014, the government published six criteria that were used to identify the 400,000 families, who were now referred to as more 'troubled families' (DCLG, 2014c). Five different data sources were used from three different years were used to identify the 400,000 families (DCLG, 2014d). The expansion came despite some local authorities struggling to identify the number of 'troubled families' they were allocated in Phase 1 using central government criteria, with a relaxation of the national criteria and data matching exercises helping to make up the difference (Wiggins, 2012).

9 The potential savings to 'the taxpayer' from the TFP

A key part of the appeal of the TFP to people from across the political spectrum is the level of savings that can be

The 'massive expansion' of the programme was announced only months after an evaluation was commissioned, long before any findings were published, and when only around 1 per cent of families had been 'turned around'

made by 'turning families around' using an efficient model of 'family intervention'. Data provided by some 'exemplar' authorities involved in the programme suggest that savings may not be quite what the government hoped for.

When around 105,000 troubled families had been 'turned around', the government issued a press release stating that the TFP had already saved taxpayers 'an estimated £1.2 billion' (DCLG, 2015b). The £1.2 billion 'savings' figure, however, never features in the DCLG report *The Benefits of the Troubled Families Programme to the Taxpayer* (DCLG, 2015c), or the accompanying *Methodology* (DCLG, 2015d) report. In fact, the *Methodology* report states very clearly that 'the results reported are not results from the national programme as a whole'.

The reported £1.2 billion figure is a gross saving, meaning it doesn't take into account the total cost of the interventions, which comes to around £550 million, according to the report. Therefore the very best estimate of the net savings at the time of the report, with over 85 per cent of families 'turned around', is around £650 million. This figure is, however, highly unlikely to be realised as it wrongly assumes that every 'claimed-for' family was 'turned around' as a direct result of the TFP, that nothing would have changed without the intervention of the TFP, and that 'turned around' 'troubled families' will never again require another related intervention.

10 Expansion without evidence

The expansion of the TFP was announced over two years before the independent evaluation of the programme was due to publish any findings about the effectiveness of its work. The only information relating to the effectiveness of the programme has been collected from local authorities who were delivering the programme, receiving funding for it and under pressure to demonstrate compliance with the Prime Minister's timetable. This data was subject to different audit processes within local authorities and, although it was published by the government, as the information provided did not constitute official statistics, it was outside of the remit of the UK Statistics Authority (Spicker, 2013). The only information relating to the families engaged in the TFP has again been collected by local authorities, often using different data collection and storage methods.

The approach of the TFP has also been expanded into other service areas, with some local authorities commissioning social care services for 'troubled adults' with 'complex and chaotic needs' (Calkin, 2015), and with David Cameron suggesting that the 'determined' 'troubled families' approach should be extended 'further and faster' (Cameron, 2015).

Summary

The government's 'troubled families' story is, in short, too good to be true. The near perfect symmetry between government predictions of numbers of 'troubled families' in each local authority area and the numbers that local authorities then found, worked with, and 'turned around' is hard enough to believe. The perfect matching occurred in spite of the numbers provided by the government being drawn from a small survey that was carried out five years previously for completely different purposes, and which didn't include specific details about educational attendance or families committing crime or anti-social behaviour. The 'massive expansion' of the programme was announced only months after an evaluation was commissioned, long before any findings were published, and when only around 1 per cent of families had been 'turned around'.

The TFP deserves closer public and political scrutiny than it has received to date. Few of the claims made, regarding the need for the programme or for its success, stand up to any form of scrutiny. The proposed expansions of the approach into different types of households and different service areas should hopefully act as a catalyst for greater critical interest in the programme.

In conclusion, the TFP itself would benefit from the same kind of 'persistent, assertive and challenging' intervention it prescribes for disadvantaged families.

Biography

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