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The 'troubled families' numbers game

In December 2011, the UK Coalition Government launched the Troubled Families Programme, aimed at turning round the lives of the 120,000 most 'troubled families' in England. At the launch of the programme, the Prime Minister David Cameron stated:

I want to talk about troubled families. Let me be clear what I mean by this phrase. 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 (Cameron, 2011).

The figure of 120,000 was derived from research published by the previous government in 2007 on 'families with multiple disadvantages', using data collected in 2004. These disadvantages included housing conditions, material deprivation and health problems but the three national criteria for 'troubled families' included the behavioural characteristics of crime/anti-social behaviour, educational exclusion and worklessness. It was claimed that these families cost the government £9 billion per year. Indicative numbers of 'troubled families' in each local authority area were identified using government deprivation data from 2007 and 'child well-being' data from 2009.

The TFP has been subject to a number of criticisms about the (mis)uses of data with Ruth Levitas arguing that 'anyone with any statistical sophistication will recognise it (the figure of 120,000 'troubled families') as spuriously accurate' (Levitas, 2012: 5). Local authority progress reports on the number of families 'turned around' by the programme are not official statistics and are therefore outside the remit and scrutiny of the UK Statistics Authority. Some local authorities have struggled to identify the number of 'troubled families' they have been allocated (Wiggins, 2012). These concerns and the relative infancy of the programme have not prevented the government from announcing the 'massive expansion' of the programme before any evaluation had reported any findings.

In August 2014, (following an initial announcement in June 2013) the government published six criteria that were used to identify 400,000 more 'troubled families' in England for 'Phase 2' of the programme. They also informed local authorities of the five different data sources from three different years that had been used to identify the families, but didn't disclose the methodology used.

The diagram illustrates the development of the Troubled Families Programme since its launch, with a specific focus on the numbers involved in the programme and the sources of evidence used.

References

Cameron, D, 2011, *Troubled families speech*, 15 December 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/troubled-families-speech> [Accessed 8 December 2014]

Levitas, R, 2012, There may be 'trouble' ahead: what we know about those 120,000 'troubled' families, *Policy Response Series No.3*, PSE

Wiggins, K, 2012, Councils question troubled families numbers, 13 August 2012, <http://www.lgcplus.com/briefings/services/childrens-services/councils-question-troubled-families-numbers/5048165.article> [Accessed 8 December 2014]

June 2007: Families at risk report identifies 120,000 families offering from 5 out of 7 disadvantages:

- No parent in the family is in work;
- Family lives in 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 median income);
- Family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items.



December 2011: Troubled Families Programme launched, with 120,000 'troubled families identified as those who:

- Are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour;
- Have children not in school;
- Have an adult on out of work benefits;
- Cause high costs to the public purse.

Cost of 'troubled families' is estimated at £9 billion pa, an average of £75,000 per family. Numbers of 'troubled families' in each local authority identified using **Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)** data from **2007** and **'child well-being' data from 2009**



June 2012: The 'massive expansion' of the TFP announced, to include 400,000 'high-risk' families. No criteria or methodology published in support of this figure



July 2014: Local authorities informed of data sources for identifying 400,000 more 'troubled families':

- Families and Children Survey (2008)
- Ministry of Justice survey of adult prisoners (2010)
- Department for Education Children in Need census (as at 31 March 2012)
- Department for Education National Pupil database (as at 31 March 2012)
- Millennium Cohort Study (2012)



August 2014: Government publishes criteria for 400,000 families':

- 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.



October 2014: Progress information published suggests that 69,508 families had been 'turned around' by August 2014. Only **5893** of these families had gained continuous employment