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Troubling times for young people and families with troubles – responding to truancy, rioting and families struggling with adversity

Abstract

The Big Society was one of the UK Prime Minister's flagship policy ideas prior to his election in 2010 and has since become part of the UK coalition government's legislative programme. A key aspect of the Big Society is to mend 'societally Broken Britain' by supporting families as 'strong families are the foundation of a bigger, stronger society'. However in the aftermath of the riots of August 2011 in London and other parts of England, the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, has suggested that parents of children who regularly truant need to be confronted and challenged and has proposed penalising parents of truanting children by cutting their benefits. This article considers whether withholding benefits from families is an effective means of tackling antisocial behaviour or does this plan represent an ideological view of welfare recipients as being irresponsible and a commitment to the penalization of the socially excluded? This article will consider whether the Big Society truly offers the prospect of a new approach to young people and families deemed to be 'in trouble' or whether the August 2011 riots created the environment for justifying cuts in public spending by shifting responsibility for crime and crime control from the criminal justice system onto vulnerable young people and low-income families.

Keywords: truancy, youth offending, parenting, family support.

Introduction

The UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, has described the Big Society as a means of building 'a bigger and stronger society' (Cabinet Office, 2010) and he identified parents and families as fundamental to achieving the aims of the Big Society. He has argued that societal renewal in the Big Society should involve 'empowering and enabling individuals, families and communities to take control of their lives' and emphasised the need to help 'build a society where families and communities are stronger' as 'strong families are the foundation of a bigger, stronger society' (Cameron, 2011a). Indeed David Cameron has promised to do

‘all we can to support every family – and every kind of family’ and to be the ‘most family friendly government you have ever seen in this country’ (Cameron, 2010a) as ‘what matters most to a child’s life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting’ (Cameron, 2010b). However in the wake of the August 2011 riots, which were described as ‘the worst bout of civil unrest in a generation’ (Lewis *et al.*, 2011), the Prime Minister stated that discipline and rigour were now needed to mend the ‘broken society’, and parents need to know there will be real consequences to their inactions if their children continually misbehave (Cameron, 2011b). David Cameron blamed the riots on a lack of proper parenting, upbringing, ethics and morals (Cameron, 2011c). The Prime Minister now believes that challenging families and parents is the starting point for ‘mending the broken society’ and he identified single parent families as a specific target as he has judged that:

‘...many of the rioters ... 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’ (Cameron, 2011d).

In addition to single parent families, the welfare system was also identified as a source of the malaise at the heart of the broken society. David Cameron believes that the welfare system ‘encourages the worst in people ... incites laziness that excuses bad behaviour that erodes self-discipline that discourages hard work ... above all that drains responsibility away from people’ (Ibid). He characterises this as a moral hazard in our welfare system which encourages people to behave irresponsibly as they know the state will always bail them out (Ibid). In response to these concerns the Prime Minister established social policy review groups to identify plans and programmes to deliver the change needed in the country. These plans would be subject to a ‘family test’ which means that ‘[i]f it hurts families, if it

undermines commitment, if it tramples over the values that keeps people together, or stops families from being together, then we shouldn't do it' (Cameron, 2011d).

One plan that has been suggested by the social review group, and supported by the Prime Minister, is that parents of children in England who regularly truant could have their benefits cut. This is a plan which should enjoy public popularity, in August 2011 a similar proposal to financially penalise rioters and their families was made in a government e-petition which called for rioters and their families to lose their welfare benefits and council homes. This proposal was the first e-petition to receive over 100,000 signatures.¹ Conversely, an e-petition arguing that such a proposal would further isolate and unjustly punish family members who had not participated in the riots received only 19 signatures.² Similarly in polls conducted as part of the LSE/Guardian *Reading the Riots* empirical study, the most popular reasons cited by the public for the rioting were reasons of poor parenting and moral decline, whereas those people involved in the riots cited reasons associated with poverty, government policy and unemployment (Lewis *et al.*, 2011). More recently Michael Gove, the then Education Secretary, revived these plans to dock unpaid truancy fines from child benefit payments in response to parents who 'fail to face up to their responsibilities' by allowing their children to play truant (Gove, 2014).

The plan to cut benefit payments to parents in response to the truanting behaviour of their children is premised on the assumption that parents of children who truant have not accepted their responsibility and they can be made to do so by the threat of withholding benefits. The

¹ <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/7337>

² <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/10784>

root causes of truancy, and other social problems such as youth crime and rioting, are viewed in terms of a breakdown of morality associated with dysfunctional families such as single parent families or families dependent on benefit payments. In Weberian terms the social class most affected by this proposal will be those on the lowest incomes and most dependent on state assistance. This population has also been characterised as the ‘precariat’ (Wacquant, 2008), the urban underclass (Murray, 1990) or the population not in education, employment or training (NEET). This rationale allows for particular types of families, namely working class and socially excluded (Gillies, 2005a, 2006, 2008), to be labelled as ‘problem families’ or ‘troubled families’ who ‘terrorise’ their communities (Parr and Nixon, 2008). Wacquant has referred to this focus on a ‘dangerous, immoral, dysfunctional underclass’ in need of urgent discipline and control as the ‘penalisation of poverty’ (Wacquant, 2001, 2009). Furthermore Haylett has characterised the construction of working class families as feckless and facile as a form of ‘social racism’ which is motivated by a distaste for the working classes (Haylett, 2001, 2003) and which obscures the fact that the government can be implicated in the causes of anti-social and criminal behaviour.

This article will examine the links between parenting and truancy, and other forms of antisocial behaviour such as youth offending, and question the effectiveness of removing benefits from parents as punishment for their children’s behaviour. It will examine whether the proposal to withhold benefits from parents passes the government’s own ‘family test’ by questioning whether financially penalising low-income parents is an effective means of tackling truancy and other forms of youthful antisocial behaviour. It will consider the answer to these questions against the background of the current austerity cuts in public investment while also simultaneously investing £668 million in targeting a small proportion of families

deemed as ‘high-risk’ under the Troubled Families Programme. The article will argue that the plan to withhold benefits from parents of children who truant represents a perpetuation of the coalition government’s narrative of an ineffectual welfare system that encourages the irresponsibility that underpins broken Britain’s social decay. This narrative fails to adequately take account of the multiple disadvantages faced by families struggling with austerity, adversity, truancy and youth antisocial behaviour.

Truancy, youth anti-social behaviour and family life

Various research studies have found a strong link between parenting and family circumstances and the chances that a child becomes involved in behaviour such as truancy or anti-social and offending behaviour (Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000; Graham & Bowling, 1995; Hales *et al.*, 2009). These studies have consistently concluded that for both males and females the odds of offending of those who truanted were more than three times greater than for those who had not truanted. Clearly there is a reciprocal relationship between offending and truancy, although it is difficult to determine which causes which, nonetheless the probability of committing offences rises considerably if truanting or excluded from school, especially permanently excluded. These studies have also emphasised that not only must the child be attending school, but the child’s experience of school, the extent to which they enjoy school, do well and achieve good results, the extent to which schools are characterised by the pupils as having poor teaching quality and a lack of clear rules can all be significant factors in preventing truancy and other antisocial behaviour (Beam, 2002; Crosnoe *et al.*, 2002; Graham, 1990; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Hayward & Sharp, 2005).

Parents have an important role to play in children's school adjustment, attendance and performance. Graham and Bowling used self-report data from a nationally representative random sample of 1721 young people in England and Wales and found that school truants usually had a poor relationship with one or both parents, family members in trouble with the law, low attachment to family and were poorly supervised in that their parents frequently did not know where their child was, whom they were with or what they were doing (Graham and Bowling, 1995). An analysis of *The Millennium Cohort Study and the National Longitudinal Survey of Young People* found that children aged 13 to 14 years and who live in families with five or more of the problems listed below are 36 times more likely to be excluded from school than children in families with no problems. The set of family disadvantages used are: mental health; physical disability; substance misuse; domestic violence; financial stress; neither parent in work; teenage parenthood; poor basic skills; living in poor housing conditions (Feinstein and Sabates, 2006). Parents' involvement in school and monitoring of school performance lessens the likelihood of truancy, school failure and associated outcomes such as offending or antisocial behaviour (Hart *et al.*, 2007). Clearly parents have an important role to play in children's school adjustment, attendance and performance, however this is a complex association which is not necessarily unidirectional. But the present government has interpreted this as a causal relationship while simultaneously disaggregating the effects of structural factors such as poverty.

Intervening in families to respond to truancy and antisocial behaviour

Principle of non-intervention

Public authorities in Britain traditionally 'fought shy of intervening in the private sphere' (Cornford et al 2013, Milner 2010:5, Lewis 2007) of family life as it was considered neither

desirable, nor justifiable, for the state to involve itself in every aspect of family life or to dictate to parents how to raise their children. The notion of the family as constituting a 'private' space has a long tradition in liberal theory, dating back to Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau, all of whom treated the family as a small republic existing outside of state interference (Moosa-Mitha, 2005: 383, Greene, 1979; Cafagna, 1982). The liberal paternalist view considered that parents are best able to undertake their parenting tasks within a 'privileged sphere ... free from institutional constraint and censure' (Eekelaar, 2006: 82) and where they are confident in the knowledge that the state will not arbitrarily interfere with their parenting (Moosa-Mitha, 2005: 383). The underlying philosophical premise with regard to any state intervention is that the state might justify its intervention only by showing that the family cannot provide for itself and that any intervention should be to the least extent possible (Goldstein *et al.*, 1979: 9). The Children Act 1989 identifies a unique role for the state in helping families to meet their responsibility, and in providing support to children whose lives include a number of the circumstances that have been identified in the previous section. Parts III, IV and V of the 1989 Act contain carefully structured provisions designed to strike a balance between the need to protect vulnerable children from the consequences of inadequate parenting, and the need to protect the right to respect for family life free from interference by public authorities, a right which is guaranteed by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. For example, compulsory intervention in a child's life has to be authorised by a court and these compulsory powers should only be invoked after consideration has been given as to whether the child's welfare could not be better promoted by support furnished under Part III of the 1989 Act in co-operation with the family (Department of Health 1991a: 3.10).

Part III of the Children Act 1989 sets out a comprehensive framework in which universal services such as education, health services, family support and child care are provided to families in a non-stigmatising, co-operative and constructive way. *Guidance* suggests that such steps might involve advice and support services for parents, the provision of family support services, family centres, day care and accommodation, and health care and social care (Department of Health, 1991a). Given that the overriding philosophy of the 1989 Act is that children are best brought up by their families,³ this appears to be a general encouragement to local authorities to work in partnership with families which may be experiencing difficulties so as to try to avoid the worst effects of family conflict.

The 1989 Act envisages local authorities providing interventions that improve parenting skills, children's physical and mental health and reduce risks of child abuse and consequently potentially reduce the risk of children engaging in truancy and antisocial and offending behaviour. *Guidance* stresses that minor shortcomings in the quality of parenting should not trigger the possibility of compulsory intervention unless they have serious and lasting effects on the child (Department of Health, 1991b). This view echoes the *Review of Child Care Law* which informed the development of the provisions of the Children Act 1989 and which states that 'it is important in a free society to maintain the rich diversity of lifestyles which is secured by permitting families a large measure of autonomy in the way in which they bring up their children' (Department of Health and Social Services, 1985: 2.13). Lord Templeman in *Re KD (a minor ward) (termination of access)*⁴ attempted to delineate the acceptable balance between respect for family autonomy and protecting the child from harm by stressing that compulsory state intervention in family life will only be justified where the court is satisfied that any harm suffered by the child is linked to specific deficits in parental care or

³ Section 17(1) Children Act 1989

⁴ [1988] 1 AC 806, at page 812:

control, '[i]t matters not whether the parent is wise or foolish, rich or poor, educated or illiterate' ... '[p]ublic authorities cannot improve on nature' ... 'provided the child's moral and physical health are not in danger'.⁵ Similar views have also been expressed by the judiciary more recently, most notably Hedley J in *Re L (Care: Threshold Criteria)*⁶ who stated that '[s]ociety must be willing to tolerate very diverse standards of parenting, including the eccentric, the barely adequate and the inconsistent ... it is not the provenance of the state to spare children all the consequences of defective parenting' and Lady Hale in *Re B (A Child) (Care Proceedings: Threshold Criteria)*⁷ who stated that:

'[w]e are all frail human beings, with our fair share of unattractive character traits, which sometimes manifest themselves in bad behaviours which may be copied by our children. But the state does not and cannot take away the children of all the people who commit crimes, who abuse alcohol, who suffer from physical or mental illnesses or disabilities, or who espouse anti-social political or religious beliefs.'

Coercive intervention: enforcing parental responsibility

The principle of non-intervention in family life has been transformed into an expectation that state intervention will not be confined to protecting children from harm, but instead will be justified when parents are deemed to have 'failed' in their parenting role (Bridgeman, 2007; Gilles, 2005a; Keating, 2008; Reece, 2006). Covell and Howe (2001) rationalise that a hands-off approach to state intervention in family life is not sustainable as the state has a responsibility to intervene in children's lives to address harmful social conditions through the use of proactive and preventive programs that can act as resources for parents in helping them overcome any parenting difficulties that they may encounter. Similarly feminist theorists (Boyden, 1993; Pateman, 1992; Ruddick, 1982; Stephens, 1995) have argued that there is

⁵ Ibid, per Lord Templeman.

⁶ [2007] 1 FLR 2050, at para 50.

⁷ [2013] UKSC 33, at para 143

nothing essentially private about the family as the role of the family is to support the state by acting as a socializing site for the next generation of citizens. Reece identified a shift in the meaning and use of the concept of ‘responsibility’ for children’s behaviour from parental authority to parental accountability which requires compliance with prevailing norms (2003, 2006). Reece (2006: 43) notes that the shift from ideas of parental responsibility to parental accountability ‘enables the law to be uniquely intrusive and judgemental, because every parent on being held up to scrutiny is found lacking’. Consequently the notion of partnership between the state and families entrenched in the Children Act 1989 is now replaced by a focus on parental irresponsibility which is ‘heavily conditioned by a model of the family as a source of risk to children or as a (potentially incompetent) ally’ (Cornfold *et al.*, 2013: 12).

This approach to family life allows for particular types of parents to be controlled and those who parent in an ‘acceptable’ way are not subject to the same interventions (Hollingsworth, 2007: 207). The law-abiding hard working families taking responsibility for controlling and civilizing their children and thus promoting harmony, inclusivity and civility (Clarke 2005: 451) represent the exemplar. Troubled families, on the other hand, become the objects of intensified surveillance, intervention and penalisation in the drive to reduce antisocial behaviour (Clarke, 2005: 458; Garland 2001; Hughes and Edwards, 2002). In this context the proposal to respond to truancy and regulating parental behaviour is not new. Where the child is not attending school local education authorities can apply to the court for an education supervision order under the Children Act 1989. Similarly the Education Act 1996 provided local education authorities with the power to apply for a school attendance order or prosecute the parent for the child’s irregular attendance under section 444. The Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 creates a more serious offence of knowing that the child is not regularly attending school and failing to ‘cause’ the child to attend. Parenting contracts and

parenting orders can also be used. Parenting contracts are designed to ensure that parents of truanting children voluntarily obtain professional help with attendance problems and to promote a better working relationship between them and the school. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced the 'parenting order' which enables the court to require the parent to attend parenting programmes and if necessary to control the future behaviour of the young person in a specified manner, for example they may be ordered to ensure their child attends school. The Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 empowers schools to apply for a parenting order where a child has been excluded for serious misbehaviour and provides for a fixed penalty system of 'on the spot fines' for parents in cases of truancy. There is evidence that such programmes can lead to positive changes in parenting styles (Scott *et al.*, 2006) however the court ordered elements have been found to be coercive, stigmatising, patronising, controlling, unpopular and ultimately counter-productive (Ghate & Ramella, 2002; Field, 2007, Powell, 2007).

Stigmatising and coercive intervention: regulating the behaviour of socially disadvantaged families

What is novel about the proposal to cut parents benefits in response to their children's truancy is that this proposal is specifically targeting poor and marginalised families. As such, it represents part of a wider moral agenda that seeks to legitimise welfare cuts and regulate and control the behaviour of marginalised families by blaming 'feral' families and feckless parents for 'moral and economic decline' (Jensen and Tyler, 2012). This proposal simultaneously ignores the corrosive impact of poverty and poor living conditions on family life and the ability of parents to effectively engage with their children's education. Rather

than addressing the problems of inequality and poverty, the marginalized and the poor are simplistically blamed for refusing to accept personal responsibility.

This austere, demonising and blaming attitude towards working class parents is also evidenced in other aspects of government policy towards families, such as the Troubled Families Programme. In response to the August 2011 riots David Cameron established a Troubled Families Unit within the Department for Communities and Local Government to co-ordinate intensive support for troubled families across central government departments. The Prime Minister pledged £448 million to turning around the lives of 120,000 troubled families (increased in June 2013 by £200 million to provide support for a further 400,000 troubled families), meaning families who are experiencing problems such as crime and anti-social behaviour, school exclusion or truancy and living on benefits. Each troubled family will have a single caseworker who will help them through the maze of agencies at their disposal and form a plan of action including 'basic, practical things that are the building blocks of an orderly home and a responsible life ... like getting the children to school on time'. When 'troubled families' were first discussed the government relied upon the *Families at Risk* criterion where a family had to exhibit five of the following seven characteristics to be counted as one of the 120,000 troubled families: (i) no parent in the family is in work, (ii) family lives in overcrowded housing, (iii) no parent has any qualifications, (iv) mother has mental health problems, (v) at least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity, (vi) family has low income, and (vii) family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items (Cabinet Office, 2007). There was no measure of truancy or anti-social behaviour included in these categories. Subsequently troubled families became defined as households who: are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, have children not in school,

have an adult on out of work benefits and cause high costs to the public purse (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012). This change represents a shift from families having troubles to families being the cause of trouble (Levitas, 2012) with parenting represented as the most significant cause of childhood and social problems. Success is measured in terms of getting truanting children back in school, a reduction in criminal and antisocial behaviour, helping parents on the road back to work and a reduction in costs to the taxpayer and local authorities (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012). To achieve these outcomes local authorities will be able to take sanctions against families who refuse to participate, such as loss of a secure tenancy, court action or even care proceedings. Indeed the Troubled Families tsar Louise Casey, in a speech to the Local Government Association, has urged local authorities to be more 'authoritative' and 'challenging' with families, to cease 'colluding' with parents in making excuses for their children's behaviour and not to worry about being 'nice' (Casey, 2013).

The Troubled Families Programme overlooks the significant challenges that poverty presents for millions of families in pursuit of turning round the lives of 120,000 troubled families, which represents approximately 1% of the total number of families in the UK (Ridge, 2013). Similar to the plan to withhold benefits from parents of children who truant, the Troubled Families Programme discursively collapses 'families with troubles' and 'troublesome families', while simultaneously implying that they are dysfunctional as families and feeding vindictive attitudes to the poor (Levitas, 2012: 8). This policy is an example of a 'simplistic functionalist perspective' on antisocial behaviour which views it merely as a product of personal or social pathology and ignores the socio-historical, economic and cultural contexts of the lives of young people and their families (Armstrong, 2004: 113). This policy represents

a 'crisis of governance' which offers a 'simplistic crime management system' which focuses its attention on a policy of containment through the morality of 'blame' (Ibid: 104).

Linking welfare, criminal justice policy and civil society

The welfare system's ostensible purpose is, amongst others, the relief of poverty and the achievement of greater economic equality in society for families and individuals (Larkin, 2007: 295). However the process of making welfare rights increasingly conditional upon behaviour has been underway for some time (Dean and Melrose, 1996; Novak, 1997). The communitarian agenda of Etzioni (1995) and Giddens (1994) pointed towards explanations for social problems which facilitated greater levels of individual autonomy and away from 'orthodox subjectivism' theory which acknowledged environmental and sociological circumstances as prime factors associated with antisocial behaviour and crime (Ramsay 2006: 31). This agenda encouraged individuals to recognise their responsibilities to themselves, their family, communities and society in order to create strong, moral communities. These communities would consequently engender a sense of respect amongst their members, on which their rights should be conditional. This communitarian agenda gave primacy to individual duty and responsibility over rights (Dwyer, 1998: 495) and the expressive power of punishment as means of reinforcing the moral order of the community. In such a context, the welfare system becomes a tool for effecting change in people's attitudes and behaviour. The principles of universality and opportunity and the social democratic and community-based ideas associated with Beveridge have been replaced by a libertarian ideology which views the welfare system through the prism of neo-liberalism. Accordingly welfare benefits and services are seen as privileges that a society may bestow on its dutiful members who agree to meet compulsory duties or patterns of behaviour (Selbourne, 1994). Thus the social

welfare system is being manipulated to regulate families on benefits and compel them into behaving and parenting in a socially responsible manner (Larkin, 2007).

The penalization of inadequate parenting also resonates with ‘new right’ underclass theories popular in the 1980s. The American social policy analyst Charles Murray argued that the state welfare system was enabling young mothers to live independently of fathers and thus increased the number of young people growing up without an appropriate male role model. These young people, it was argued, consequently turn to drugs and crime (Murray, 1984, 1990). Murray’s solution to this was to advocate the removal of state benefits. In Britain, Dennis and Erdos expounded similar views by arguing that youth antisocial behaviour, including truancy, was the inevitable result of the disintegration of the family unit and the growth of ‘fatherless families’ (Dennis and Erdos, 1992). Such views resonated strongly with political leaders, for example Margaret Thatcher called for a return to ‘Victorian values’ in order to re-establish a sense of ‘discipline’, ‘decency’, ‘morality’ and ‘responsibility’, and reverse the tide of ‘family disintegration’ (Dennis, 1993). Similarly John Major promised to lead Britain back to a basic morality of decency, self-discipline, family values and respect for the law (Major, 1993). As shadow Home Secretary Tony Blair wrote, ‘we should never excuse the commission of criminal acts on the grounds of social conditions’ (Blair, 1994: 3), instead he characterised youth antisocial behaviour as a descent into moral chaos (Haydon and Scraton, 2000). This reflects Blair’s view that failure to accept responsibility and to respect the moral order of society justifies harsh penalties, or ‘no rights without responsibilities’, which Giddens described as a ‘prime motto’ for New Labour’s (Giddens, 1998). These views were echoed by the David Cameron when he highlighted fatherless families as one of the causes of the August 2011 riots.

The proposal to withhold benefits from parents of children who truant is not based upon a compelling and dispassionate review of the evidence, instead it is representative of the UK coalition government's ideological commitment to reform of the welfare system by 'remoralizing' welfare recipients. This ideology is best evidenced by the Prime Minister's Director of Strategy view that austerity represents an ideological opportunity to 'wean the country off its apparently unbreakable dependency upon the state, centralism, welfare ... the corrosive habit of half a century' (Hilton, 2010). The plan to withhold benefits from parents of truanting children ignores the fact that the August 2011 riots occurred during school holidays and it shifts responsibility and blame for bad behaviour onto 'troubled families', usually working class and/or ethnic minority families who will inevitably be the subjects of such interventions (Flint, 2009). In particular it is mothers who will bear the brunt of this coercion as it is still predominantly mothers who take responsibility for the day-to-day care of children (Gillies, 2005b, 2011; Donoghue, 2011) and it is working class mothers who will be positioned as familial and social failures (Gillies, 2006; Skeggs, 2004).

Thus the August 2011 riots have created a platform for 'state sponsored projects of social engineering on an unprecedented scale' (Crawford, 2009). This represents what Skeggs and Loveday describe as 'sustained social contempt' for the working classes who are, as austerity increases, 'cut off from investment in almost anything, are criminalized and defined as an ever more abject "feral underclass"' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). Jamieson characterises this focus on benefit withdrawal as indicative of the establishment of Wacquant's concept of 'social panopticism' (Wacquant, 2001: 407) where social policy is employed as an instrument of surveillance of poor and problem populations (Jamieson, 2012). As antisocial behaviour is being branded in 'reductive, class-based and apocalyptic terms' (Sim, 2009: 89), less people

qualify as 'deserving' poor anymore. Such an approach is paradigmatic of an anti-welfare rhetoric (Culpitt, 1999) that legitimises the stigmatising and punitive responses which are firmly based on individual responsibility. As poverty, welfare, truancy and antisocial behaviour are linked, the poor are labelled as irresponsible and undeserving - simply to be poor and in receipt of welfare payments is to be culpable or at least vulnerable to culpability (Chunn and Gavigan, 2004). This proposal conveys the impression that every person on welfare needs to be watched and reported. These families are then coerced into conforming to normative value-laden definitions of successful, and competent, parenting which resonates most closely with the values and ambitions of white, middle class parents. Thus in the Big Society particular types of family have come to embody the root cause of social ills such as truancy, delinquency and crime. Targeting and penalising these families is a medium for preventing these problems and regulating those families who are unable, or unwilling, to conform to the moral values of the middleclass mainstream. This stigmatising approach involves a focus on individual deficiencies and a deflection of blame from structural constraints, such as poverty, which make family life and parenting difficult (Gillies, 2005a; Hill and Wright, 2003). The social welfare system has consequently become less a vehicle for the relief of poverty and more an instrument of education and punishment of those who rely on social security benefits (Larkin, 2007).

Troubled young people leading troubled lives

The application of underclass theories attribute causal primacy for anti-social behaviour to deficient parenting and dysfunctional families and ignores the complex, deep-rooted and multi-faceted challenges that confront children who are engaging in truancy, anti-social and offending behaviour, their families and the various professionals who work with them. This approach promotes the view that poverty and structural inequality are not the source of the

problem, there is no child poverty, only bad parenting is to blame. Many youths who truant have serious multiple problems in terms of their school achievement, psychological health, alcohol and drug abuse. Regarding the young people who appeared in court for riot related matters, 42% of these young people were entitled to free school meals, 64% lived in one of the 5th most deprived areas and 3% lived in one of the 5th least deprived areas. 66% were classified as having special educational needs, compared to 21% for the national average. More than 33% of young people involved in the riots had been excluded from school in the academic year preceding the riots, compared to 6% exclusions for all Year 11 pupils (Ministry of Justice, 2012). The Institute of Public Policy Research found that in an overwhelming majority of the areas worst affected by the riots, youth unemployment and child poverty were significantly higher than the national average (Institute of Public Policy Research, 2011).

These figures indicate that poverty, disadvantage and educational disaffection were important characteristics of those young people involved in the August 2011 riots. The UK government's proposal to withdraw benefits from parents of children who truant ignores the complex patterns and interrelated problems that young people endure and represents a very hard-line, moralistic and discriminatory approach to poorer parents. This approach will serve to disadvantage the most structurally vulnerable children and those families least able to cope with economic marginalisation. This latest proposal also fails the government's own 'family test' as it is likely to be counter-productive. It will inevitably involve schools in policing the behaviour of parents which tends to preclude schools and parents taking a partnership approach in ensuring that not only do the children attend school, but also that they perform to the best of their ability and are nurtured to realise their potential. Similarly the Troubled Families Programme has a strong emphasis on changing behaviour, rather than material

circumstances. From the outset the Troubled Families Programme has been criticised for using poverty indicators as the prime way of estimating the number of these families, and associating poverty with antisocial behaviour (Levitas, 2012). A more subtle approach is needed than the blunt instrument of threatening parents, one which seeks to improve relationships and provides opportunities to directly tackle the underlying causes of truancy and offending behaviour. Providing families and school with support may be an effective way of preventing socially alienated and vulnerable children from truanting.

Supporting families experiencing troubles

There is a need for prevention policies and interventions to avoid a narrow focus on personal and familial deficits and dysfunctions and instead take into account the social, economic and contextual factors that are frequently associated with truancy. Young people's truancy and antisocial behaviour should be approached as a social phenomenon whose solution lies in providing non-stigmatising support to the most disadvantaged children and their families including for example mentoring, speech and language therapy and educational support. In September 2003 the Green Paper on children at risk, *Every Child Matters*, promised a radical transformation in support services for every child whatever their background or circumstances by encouraging service providers to focus on early intervention, effective prevention and supporting parents and carers (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003). Providing high-quality services for children and their families was seen as an essential step in preparing young people for the challenges and stresses of life and giving them real opportunities to achieve their full potential. *Every Child Matters* followed the 1998 consultation document *Supporting Families*, which outlined a programme of measures to strengthen the family as the 'foundation on which our communities, our society and our

country are built' (Home Office, 1998). *Supporting Families* was based on the basic principle that the interests of children were paramount and it explicitly focussed on the practical support that government policy can provide to help parents meet their responsibilities to their children. *Every Child Matters* identifies 5 key principles which now underpin all areas of service provision relating to young people – be healthy, stay strong, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. Making a positive contribution includes being involved with the community and society, engaging in positive behaviour in and out of school and not engaging in antisocial or offending behaviour (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003; Department for Education and Skills, 2004). *Every Child Matters* emphasises the importance of supporting parents to raise their children to achieve good outcomes. The Children Act 2004 incorporated many of the proposals from *Every Child Matters* and accordingly imposes a duty on children's services to improve the well-being of children in relation to 'the contribution made by them to society' and to cooperate in helping children become responsible citizens. Under the overarching policy framework provided by *Every Child Matters*, the prevention of antisocial behaviour amongst young people has become one outcome objective inter-connected to others that focus on various aspects of young people's social and personal needs seeking to engage them as active citizens who can make a positive contribution to society.

The supportive and partnership approach of the Children Act 2004 is also in line with Britain's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides for the right of every child to 'a standard of living adequate for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.' Article 18 of the Convention sets out the obligations of the state to assist parents in raising their children: '[in order to] guarantee and promote the rights enumerated in

this Convention, member states [must] provide appropriate aid to parents and legal guardians of the child in the exercise of the responsibility of raising the child.’ The United Kingdom ratified the UNCRC in December 1991, ratifying states are required, as a matter of legal obligation, to protect Convention rights in their law and practice. Thus in England and Wales the state has a conventional obligation to safeguard and promote the general health and welfare of its youngest citizens up to their 18th birthday. The philosophy that directs the general principles of the United Nations Convention, *Every Child Matters*, *Supporting Families* and the Children Act 1989 is essentially based on the protection of the personality of all young people below 18 years of age and on the mobilisation of existing resources within the community. These documents and laws recognise that sometimes parents need extra support to give them the skills and confidence to address their children’s behaviour problems and that help should be provided to families where they need it. They promote the principle that in order to reduce the risks some children face, the best strategy is to promote positive life and family experiences for all children, and not to penalise families.

The government’s proposal to take child benefits away from families fails to acknowledge, let alone provide, a means to tackle the social and familial roots of truancy, crime and disorder. The image of troubled young people as ‘children in need’, which is so evident in respect of the *Every Child Matters* agenda, has become substituted by discourses of blame, and troubled families. In the Big Society young people who engage in antisocial behaviour such as truancy or offending behaviour, and their families, are being denied the social rights envisaged in *Every Child Matters*. Social problems such as truancy have been constructed as threats to the social order, rather than as indicators of a need for support, which require tougher social and criminal justice policies designed to control and manage problem populations (Rodger, 2008). Rose characterised such constructions as exploiting a wide range

of social anxieties in which certain groups are symbolised as threats to social order (Rose, 1999a: 125). The result is that the welfare system functions as a form of exclusionary social control in which the potential threat can be contained (Rose, 1999b: 240). Instead what is needed is a redistributive politics rather than a social policy of intervention ‘to improve the poor’ (Armstrong, 2004: 106).

Diminished spending on families

In effect, the proposal to withdraw benefits from families has engendered what has been characterized as a ‘blurring, widening and masking’ (Squires, 2006) process integral for the ‘criminalisation of social policy’ (Crawford, 1999; Muncie and Hughes, 2002; Rodger, 2008; Wacquant, 2001: 407) which promotes anti-welfarism and masks decreased public spending (Jamieson, 2012). By 2017 the UK is set to have the lowest share of public spending among major capitalist economies, including the USA, as a result of the exceptionally harsh cuts in public spending currently planned (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). One consequence of these cuts in spending will be the deepening of pre-existing social inequalities (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2010) accompanied by predictions of a new ‘lost generation’ (MacDonald, 2011) and an estimated 3 million children living in poverty in the UK by 2015 (Brewer *et al.*, 2011). The Children’s Commissioner for England reported in June 2013 that a further 500,000 more children would be forced into poverty by 2015 as a result of the current spending cuts, tax policies and benefit changes with the poorest children the worst hit by welfare reforms (Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2013). The 2013 *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion* report found that for the first time since the foundation of the welfare state more people in working families are living below the poverty line than those in workless families and concluded that poorer families are under more pressure than ever before (MacInnes *et al.*, 2013). Prior to the August 2011 riots the coalition government stressed its belief that strong

and stable families of all kinds are the bedrock of a strong and stable society (HM Government, 2010: 19) and expressed commitment to a ‘whole family’ approach to families with multiple and complex problems (Kendall *et al.*, 2010). However in the aftermath of the riots there was a reduction in local authority spending ranging from 6%-25%, with an average of 13%, on youth services, early years and children’s centres which has resulted in the closure of more than 400 hundred Sure Start centres throughout the country (4Children, 2012). A report by UNISON has found that 2000 youth workers have been axed and 350 youth centres closed since 2012. As a result 41,000 youth service places and 35,000 hours of outreach work by youth workers have been lost. This equates to at least £60 million of funding withdrawn from youth services due to centrally imposed local government budget reductions (UNISON, 2014).

Support for children with speech, language and communication needs has also become harder to access as a result of significant cuts to front-line speech and language therapy services and to the specialist advisory teaching services on which parents and children depend. These cuts coincide with a 58% increase in the past 5 years in the numbers of school age children with speech, language and communication needs (Gross, 2011). The British Medical Association has criticized the lack of mental health services for adolescents and teenagers struggling with alcohol and drug addiction (British Medical Association, 2003). The Association for Young People’s Health found that 13% of boys and 10% of girls aged 11-15 have a diagnosable mental health disorder but only 25% of these young people have access to the services they need (Hagell *et al.*, 2013). *YoungMinds* and *Transition to Adulthood Alliance* found that young people in the criminal justice system are being seriously failed by inadequate and ineffective mental health provision (YoungMinds and Transition to Adulthood Alliance, 2013). They found that young people only gain access to mental health support and services

for ‘severe and debilitating’ mental illness. When they do get help it was usually in the form of medication. However, following prescription, young people often went long periods of time with no review or ongoing support. The study found that despite a plethora of policy initiatives over the past 20 years designed to improve services for young people with mental health problems at risk of or engaged in offending behaviour, very little improvements have filtered through to young people who report many of the same problems that were experienced by young people 20 years ago. Furthermore *Clinks* and the *National Council for Voluntary Youth Services* have highlighted the impact of cuts on the voluntary and community sector (Clinks, 2012; National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, 2011). They found that in 2011 over 80% of organisations had experienced a reduction in income which has led to the voluntary and community sector being ‘in an increasingly fragile state as a result of funding cuts and a simultaneous increase in demand for its services’. A troubling example of this is provided by the *National Youth Reference Group* who found that low economic growth, wide-ranging changes to the welfare system and cuts in public spending on youth services have resulted in more young people becoming homeless (Homeless Watch, 2012). Organisations and services that young people need are being closed because of funding cuts and not all local councils have suitable emergency accommodation for young people.

These levels of state resourcing risk leaving many children and families with inadequate levels of support and legitimise the greater use of compulsion such as threats, fines and imprisonment. The implication is highly class specific as the well-off are able to use their resources to achieve the best outcomes for their children while the poorer sections of society receive less support and are instead responsabilised and penalised (Gillies, 2012). These cuts are happening against the backdrop of the government investing £200 million to turn around

the lives of troubled families who represent 1% of the total population of families. The amount of money taken away from the poorest families as a result of the cuts discussed above far outweighs the amount invested in the Troubled Families Programme (Levitas, 2014). However even this £200 million depends upon measurable progress being made and it comprises only 40% of the funding needed. Over-stretched local authorities will still need to find £675 million at a time when they are being forced to slash their budgets. The Troubled Families Programme will only pay out once per family and then offers no further financial incentive to the local authority to continue working with these families should the family subsequently experience problems or need support.

Evidence also suggests that those most in need of support are the least likely to access it. Analysis from the Millennium Cohort Study showed that poorer families were less likely to receive a visit from health visitors than those families with higher incomes (Feinstein and Sabates, 2006). Feedback from parenting programmes such as Webster Stratton's Incredible Years and Triple P show that parents value extra support such as parenting classes. Yet not all parents who need these services can access them, the principle of progressive universalism is not yet being met with respect to support for parents (Leung *et al.*, 2006). The Child Poverty Review identified a number of potential barriers to engagement of those most in need of support: a fear or mistrust of statutory services and concerns that children's services might take away children from parents if they are seen to have problems (HM Treasury, 2004). Many services are perceived to cater for 'failed' or 'struggling' families, and this stigma may deter parents from accessing support that they know is available. There is a lack of readily accessible information about what services are available. Parents may recognise they need some support, but they do not know where to get help (HM Treasury and Department for Education and Skills, 2007). For families with multiple problems, fines will not work nor will

they address many of the reasons why some children are missing school, such as a child who is missing school because they are being bullied or because they are struggling to catch up with their peers.

Conclusion

The government's proposal to remove child benefits from parents of young people who truant will penalise and marginalise the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in the country despite David Cameron's promise to do 'all we can to support every family – and every kind of family' (Cameron, 2010a). This proposal reduces the responsibility of society, encourages a blaming culture that does not take account of the full circumstances, and will result in ineffective punitive sanctions. The problems confronting young people and their families are no longer defined as social, but instead are seen as resulting from poor choices made by 'uninformed, unmotivated, incompetent or irresponsible individuals' (Crawford, 2009: 814). As Slater argues:

'emotive terms, phrases and concepts have been strategically deployed ... to give the impression that "welfare" is a lifestyle choice made by dysfunctional families despite the fact that considerable social scientific evidence shatters that impression' (Slater, 2014).

Rodger (2012: 427) characterises this type of policy as the 're-orientation of welfare policy into an instrument of behaviour management' for the purpose of regulating marginal communities and poor families. The social welfare system is being used to reinforce moral standards and discipline those who transgress these standards, despite the fact that this discipline may further compound the problems and inequalities that are an inexorable feature

of their lives. The state, in a tacit recognition of its own inability to help the child, any more than the parent can, will instead penalise families while simultaneously dismantling youth and family services. The government's proposal to penalise parents ignores the complex patterns and interrelated problems that such children endure. For the current government the Big Society is needed to repair 'Broken Britain' and the root causes of 'Broken Britain' lie in a culture of dependency, intergenerational worklessness and antisocial behaviour among the 'underclass'. The broken society is therefore not caused by tough economic conditions, unemployment and reductions in government spending but instead responsibility rests with 'welfare dependent troubled families' (Ibid). Demonising parents, like demonising children, disregards the crucial impact of poverty, insecurity and poor living conditions. Instead these policies conflate disadvantaged families with dangerous classes in a way which will further marginalise these families from socio-economic opportunities, enforce social inequality and intensify class monitoring and control. In the early years of children's lives the aim should be to strengthen families, enabling them to play a full part in controlling their children's behaviour, and not to disadvantage families or to take responsibility away from them. According to this view the state must acknowledge that it, as well as the offender has some responsibility for youth crime and that society can justifiably punish young offenders and their families for their crimes only to the extent it has fulfilled its obligations to those young people and their families as members of society.

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