

Introduction

‘Looking for Trouble?’ Critically Examining the UK Government’s Troubled Families Programme

Stephen Crossley* and Michael Lambert**

*School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University

E-mail: s.j.crossley@durham.ac.uk

**Department of History, Lancaster University

E-mail: m.lambert@lancaster.ac.uk

The Troubled Families Programme (TFP) was launched by the UK Coalition Government in December 2011. Following the riots that took place in towns and cities across England during that summer, the then Prime Minister David Cameron promised to put ‘rocket boosters’ under plans to ‘turn around’ the lives of the country’s ‘most troubled families’ by the end of the Coalition’s term of office in May 2015. In his ‘fightback’ speech, delivered just a week after the riots had ended, Cameron (2011a) stated that the riots were not about poverty or race or government cuts. Instead, he argued that that the riots were ‘about behaviour: people showing indifference to right and wrong; people with a twisted moral code; people with a complete absence of self-restraint’.

Lone parent families and a dysfunctional system of social security were, in the government’s eyes at least, equally culpable for the rioting (Cameron (2011a)):

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. So if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we’ve got to start.

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. We talk about moral hazard in our financial system – where banks think they can act recklessly because the state will always bail them out. Well this is moral hazard in our welfare system – people thinking they can be as irresponsible as they like because the state will always bail them out.

At the official launch of the TFP on 15 December 2011, this theme continued, with Cameron (2011b) arguing that ‘troubled families are already pulled and prodded and poked a dozen times a week by government’ and suggesting that ‘one of the reasons for their dysfunction is their hatred of “the system” which they experience as faceless, disjointed and intrusive’. Cameron also clarified exactly what he meant by the term ‘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. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations.

Local authorities across England were enlisted to deliver the programme which, although it carried no new legislation or statutory guidance, was expected to be delivered using a 'family intervention' approach. This approach advocates using a single keyworker who can "grip" the family, their problems and the surrounding agencies' (DCLG, 2012: 18) to work with them in a 'persistent, assertive and challenging' (DCLG, 2012: 23) way which will encourage them to take responsibility for their behaviour and change their ways. These workers are expected to be 'dedicated to the family' and able to 'look at the family from the inside out, to understand its dynamics as a whole, and to offer practical help and support' (DCLG, 2012: 4). Where families did not engage with the programme, workers were encouraged by the government to, in some circumstances ask 'other agencies to accelerate threat of a sanction to exert maximum pressure on families to change' (DCLG, 2012: 28).

The TFP then, was positioned as a central government programme that would not only 'sort out' troublesome families, but would also 'sort out' the public services that were currently working with the families. 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, 2012: 9)

The programme would be run on Payment by Results (PbR) basis, with local authorities able to claim funding once families, or individuals within families, had met certain thresholds for behaviour change. More specifically, crime and anti-social behaviour had to fall and school attendance had to increase, or an adult had to move into continuous employment in order for a claim to be submitted. Once one of these thresholds was met, the family was deemed to be 'turned around' and no longer 'troubled', in the official view at least.

The TFP is now in its second phase, following a remarkably successful first phase, if government reports are to be believed. In July 2013, the 'massive expansion' of the TFP was announced, which would see 400,000 'high risk families' worked with in a similar way to the original 'troubled families' (DCLG, 2013). Further detail on the problems faced and posed by these new families was published in August 2014 (DCLG, 2014a), alongside a report – *Understanding Troubled Families* (DCLG, 2014b) – which set out the extent of some of the 'problems' faced by 'troubled families' in the first phase of the TFP. The phrase 'high risk families' was dropped and it was announced that the 400,000 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)

In May 2015, the government announced that local authorities had 'turned around' 99 per cent of the original 120,000 'troubled families' (DCLG, 2015), within the timescale laid out by David Cameron in 2011 at the start of the programme. 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. The announcement was widely covered in the national media, but scrutiny of the figures supporting these remarkable claims was largely absent. Of the 116,654 families whose lives had been 'turned around', less than 12,000 had seen an adult enter and sustain employment, according to the government's own figures. A Freedom of Information request by *The Guardian* newspaper revealed that local authorities had claimed success for around 8,000 families who had not received a 'family intervention' as part of the TFP (Bawden, 2015). The extent to which other issues such as poverty, housing issues, substance misuse or domestic violence might still be present in the lives of 'turned around' families is not revealed by the government figures, which are not regarded as official statistics (Spicker, 2013). The official evaluation of the TFP was leaked to *BBC Newsnight* in August 2016 by a civil servant who was concerned that the report was being suppressed because the research found that the TFP 'had "no discernible" effect on unemployment, truancy or criminality' (Cook, 2016).

Concerns about troublesome groups and a perceived split between a 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor are, of course, not new. The history of the 'underclass' thesis has been documented extensively (Macnicol, 1987, 1999; Welshman, 2013) elsewhere, and this includes consideration of continuities and discontinuities between the different labels that have been applied to such groups at different periods and in different places. Whilst there are undoubtedly similarities between the concept of 'troubled families' and previous concepts such as 'problem families' in the 1950s, the 'transmitted deprivation' argument advanced by Sir Keith Joseph in the 1970s and the transatlantic 'underclass' debates of the 1980s and 1990s, there are also aspects which set 'troubled families' apart from other labels. The first is that 'troubled families' represents an official label which has been brought into the public conscience by speeches from the Prime Minister and official government publications. Previous constructs have largely emerged outside of government, from social reformers, charities, pressure groups, academics and individual politicians. A second break with most previous labels applied to an 'underclass' is that the narrative surrounding 'troubled families' has been operationalised via a single central government programme. Previous governments have, of course, attempted to work with 'problem families' and the 'socially excluded' but these have tended to be through a range of different interventions. No other government programme has set out to work with a specific number of families that would be identified via official criteria. Never before has such a clear line been drawn between those deemed to be 'troubled' or problematic, and those who are not. Finally, if the second phase of the TFP turns out to be as 'successful' as the first, we could be approaching the end of the 'underclass'

thesis, with no families left who can be identified as ‘troubled’ in the eyes of the government.

This themed section, which has developed out of a short series of seminars supported by the Social Policy Association held in the early months of 2015, sets out to explore aspects of the Troubled Families Programme in more detail. The articles published here draw on material that was presented during the seminar series and which explored the history of the concept of ‘troubled families’, contemporary practice within the TFP, sociological critiques of the ‘troubled families’ concept and new opportunities for academic engagement with the ‘troubled families’ agenda.

Lambert and Crossley, in the review article, provide a detailed explication of the ‘troubled families’ concept that draws on contemporary and historical sources and highlights some international equivalents of ‘troubled families’ and the TFP, where they exist.

Macnicol then examines ‘troubled families’ by locating them in the wider historical context of the ‘underclass’ concept in the UK. He identifies some thematic continuities between different historical labels and the current debate and concludes that little has been learnt from, or indeed has been forgotten about, previous policy debates. Welshman then takes up where Macnicol left off, looking closely at both continuities and changes within and across the discourses surrounding ‘problem families’ of the 1940s and 50s and those circulating around the ‘troubled families’ of today. His work focuses on three areas: first, the ways in which such families are defined and described; second, the nature of the intervention; and, third, the criteria for success.

Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage examine the operationalisation of the TFP and juxtapose the ‘troubled families’ discourse with the counter narrative of the ‘new middle class’. Drawing on interviews with policy makers and TFP directors in two locales, they show how families get locked into disciplining policies and discourses that condemn their lifestyles and life-choices rather than providing long-term solutions to the causes of poverty, such as poor housing, bad health, lack of income or bad education. Bond-Taylor then explores the extent to which care ethics provide a productive lens through which to evaluate the TFP, using Sevenhuijsen’s Trace method for evaluating the normative frameworks constructed within policy documents. She argues that there is considerable moral ambiguity within the TFP, which creates tensions within policy and practice. Wenham offers a different perspective on the practice of the TFP and seeks to reconnect the public discourse concerning poverty and the ‘underclass’ with private and personal experiences of being in a ‘troubled family’. This is achieved by using qualitative interviews with young people to better understand the ‘lived experience’ of being in a family targeted for intervention by the TFP. She argues that understanding subjective attitudes of young people within ‘troubled families’ goes a long way to bridging the academic gap between social lives and public issues.

The themed section is completed by Sayer, whose article addresses the problem of how to discuss concepts such as ‘troubled families’ without appearing to accept, endorse or offer legitimacy to the label, or the framing of social problems that they represent. He argues that the TFP is a programme that is designed as much for the wider electorate, as it is for the ‘troubled families’ themselves. Sayer concludes with suggestions on how social scientists and academics can challenge neoliberal welfare policies such as the Troubled Families Programme.

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