Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK

Policy Response Series No.3

There may be 'trouble' ahead: what we know about those 120,000 'troubled' families

Ruth Levitas

21 April 2012

ESRC Grant RES-060-25-0052

Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK

Overview

The Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK Project is funded by the Economic, Science and Research Council (ESRC). The Project is a collaboration between the University of Bristol, University of Glasgow, Heriot Watt University, Open University, Queen's University (Belfast), University of York, the National Centre for Social Research and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The project commenced in April 2010 and will run for three-and-a-half years.

The primary purpose is to advance the 'state of the art' of the theory and practice of poverty and social exclusion measurement. In order to improve current measurement methodologies, the research will develop and repeat the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey. This research will produce information of immediate and direct interest to policy makers, academics and the general public. It will provide a rigorous and detailed independent assessment on progress towards the UK Government's target of eradicating child poverty.

Objectives

This research has three main objectives:

- To improve the measurement of poverty, deprivation, social exclusion and standard of living
- To assess changes in poverty and social exclusion in the UK
- To conduct policy-relevant analyses of poverty and social exclusion

For more information and other papers in this series, visit www.poverty.ac.uk

This paper has been published by Poverty and Social Exclusion, funded by the ESRC. The views expressed are those of the Author[s].

Author

Professor Ruth Levitas
School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies
University of Bristol
12 Woodland Road
Bristol
United Kingdom
Email: ruth.levitas@bristol.ac.uk

Acknowledgement:

Thanks to members of the ESRC Poverty and Social Exclusion team for comments on an earlier draft, and to Matt Barnes for locating the source of the area distribution figures.

There may be 'trouble' ahead: what we know about those 120,000 'troubled families'

Current government policy on social justice hinges on the claim that there are 120,000 'troubled families' in Britain. The new Social Justice Strategy focuses almost entirely upon these. Ian Duncan Smith declares on its opening page that 'the Government recently identified a group of 120,000 troubled families whose lives are so chaotic they cost the Government some £9 billion in the last year alone'.[1] The report itself says 'we estimate that there are 120,000 families living particularly troubled and chaotic lives. These families are the subject of significant government intervention – with some £9 billion spent on this particular group in the last year alone – and can cause serious problems for their local communities through crime and antisocial behaviour.'[2] The Social Justice Strategy merely cites the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) as the source of these figures. The same figure, and the same claim about the costs, appears on the DCLG website of the under the heading 'troubled families'. The DCLG also identifies the research on which the figure is based, though not the details of the costing.[3] But if we interrogate the research behind the imputed existence of 120,000 troubled families, this turns out to be a factoid – something that takes the form of a fact, but is not. It is used to support policies that in no way follow from the research on which the figure is based. The problem is not the research itself, but its misuse.

The original research is a report carried out for the Social Exclusion Task Force (SETF), then based in the Cabinet Office, in 2007.[4] It carried out some secondary analysis of the Family and Children Study (FACS), a longitudinal survey carried out by the National Centre for Social Research on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. This analysis showed that in 2004 about 2 per cent of the families in the survey had five or more of seven characteristics, and were thus severely multiply disadvantaged. The characteristics, which are listed on the DCLG website, are these:

[1] Department for Work and Pensions (2012) *Social Justice: transforming lives*, p .2, http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-justice-transforming-lives.pdf
[2] Ibid., p. 8
[3] http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/troubledfamilies/
[4] Social Exclusion Task Force (2007) *Families at Risk: background on families with multiple disadvantages*, Cabinet Office http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100416132449/http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social_exclusion_task_force/assets/families_at%20_risk/risk_data.pdf

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.

That 2 per cent of families generated an estimate of 140,000 for Britain, later recalculated as 117,000 for England, rounded to 120,000. Because it is an estimate from survey data in which the actual number of families with five or more of these disadvantages was very small, anyone with any statistical sophistication will recognise it as spuriously accurate. It ignores both sampling error (the probable discrepancy between even a randomly generated sample and the population from which it is drawn) and sample bias (the departure from randomness of the effective sample, principally caused by differential response rates across the population). The poorest (and the richest) sections of the population tend generally to have somewhat lower response rate. It is likely that sample bias would suggest that the figure for those suffering such severe disadvantage was somewhat higher at the time. The figure is now eight years out of date, and almost certainly now rising as a result of Coalition policies. The normal caution about sampling error, as opposed to bias, suggests 'plus or minus 3 per cent'. On the face of it, this could take the actual figure down to minus 60,000 (which is of course nonsense: we know the figure is greater than zero, because some actual families were identified in FACS), or up as high as 300,000.

The original report, and the later fuller report on *Families at Risk*, suggested that these were the families that needed the most intensive intervention because of their multiple problems. Other groups were, it was claimed, satisfactorily covered by existing policies. This reflects the inclination of the Blair and Brown governments to make exaggerated claims for the success of their policies and to treat poverty and social exclusion as residual problems. The policy of focussing on this minority of families experiencing severe multiple deprivation was therefore established by Labour governments, who argued that an integrated response to complex needs was required.

The DCLG website, however, makes a discursive move from families that have troubles, through families that are 'troubled', to families that are or cause trouble. It is, they say, 'unacceptable to leave the children in these families to lead the same disruptive and harmful lives as their parents'. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is reported as saying: '120,000 families are a big problem for this country. If you live near one you know very well who they are. And local services like police, health and schools also know who they are, because they spend a disproportionate amount of time and money dealing with them. These families are both troubled and causing trouble. We want to get to the bottom of their problems and resolve them – for their own good, and for the good of their communities.

Councils will now be asked to look to identify actual families, based on factors such as truanting, antisocial behaviour and cost to public services. [5].

This rhetorical strategy is present in Government rhetoric more widely. I opened with its presence in the so-called Social Justice Strategy. David Cameron's speech on troubled families in December 2011 makes the same assumptions and assertions, although scarcely bothering to pause on the issue of families with troubles. He opens with the declaration of a responsibility deficit, about 'blame, about good and bad behaviour, about morals', and sets this in the context of the 2011 riots:

> That's why today, 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. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations. We've always known that these families cost an extraordinary amount of money…but now we've come up the actual figures. Last year the state spent an estimated £9 billion on just 120,000 families…that is around £75,000 per family.

Cameron also referred to the 'Shameless' culture. We can't, he says, 'stand by while people live these lives and cause others so much misery'. He describes 'the problems these families have' as 'the kids leaving sink schools without qualifications…the parents never getting a job and choosing to live on the dole…the teenagers rampaging around the neighbourhood before turning to crime'. No mention of ill-health, poverty, poor housing there. Unsurprisingly, Cameron blames the imputed condition of such families on state failure, including excessive benefits that make it 'a rational choice to sit at home on the sofa', and a weak criminal justice system that makes it more likely that teenagers will 'smash up the bus stop and torment their neighbours'. What is required is 'a clear hard-headed recognition of how the family is going wrong – and what the family members themselves can do about it'. By February 2012, local authorities were expected to 'have identified who the troubled families are, where they live and what services they use'. The problem, as always, is the behaviour of the poor. On 17 March, the *Daily Gazette* reporting on the 'troubled families' strategy claimed that in Colchester 'About 280 families in the borough with domestic violence, substance misuse and housing problems each cost the NHS, police, and councils up to £250,000 a year to support'.[6] The *Birmingham Pos*t immediately published a government

[5] http://www.liverpoolconfidential.co.uk/News-and-Comment/Cameron-plans-to-tackle-troubled-Mersey-families
[6] http://www.gazette-news.co.uk/news/9596084.Troubled_families_cost___70m_a_year/

list showing how many of England's 'worst families' lived in each local authority.[7]

The source of this is an analysis provided by the Department for Education in March 2011 which apportioned 'a national estimate of families with multiple problems, taken from the Family and Children's Study, with LA level data on deprivation – provided by the Index of Multiple Deprivation'. That is, it estimated what proportion of the 117,000 families with multiple problems (FMP) estimated from FACS, lived in each area, and thus what the actual numbers of such families might be. That analysis pointed out that the figure of 117,000 was uncertain because the FACS data on which it was based was out of date and might have changed. It was also not based on individual or household-level data, but on area-level data. Seven indicators from the IMD were used, including income, employment, health deprivation and disability, education, barriers to housing, crime and living environment. This was combined with the Children's Well Being index, based on seven domains of material well-being, health education, crime, housing, environment and children in need. Importantly, both of these deploy aggregate, area-level statistics, which do not reflect the coincidence of particular deprivations in individual households. Thus, besides cautioning that the IMD figures also might have changed, the briefing note stresses that the estimated distribution (given as a range rather than a single figure, unlike the list in the *Birmingham Post*) 'is an area measure and does not measure FMP'. The same is true of the accompanying distribution and numbers of families with multiple problems AND a child with special educational needs or behaviour problems.[8]

The DCLG website reiterates the claim that these 120,000 families cost the taxpayer about £75,000 per family per year, or an annual total of £9 billion. Most of this money, it says, spent on taking children into care, including fostering, residential care, adoption and the costs of social workers; the criminal justice costs relating to children and adults committing crime; eviction costs; benefit payments; the costs of drug and alcohol dependency; specialist schooling including Pupil Referral Units; and health costs. There are no references to enable us to explore exactly which costs, for which parts of the population, are included in these figures. It goes on to set out the programme for 'dealing with' these 'troubled families': 'Estimates of numbers locally will be agreed and a plan of action for dealing with each family will need to be drawn up'. Local authorities and privately-contracted agencies will be paid by results, with 40 per cent of their costs being reimbursed when 'success' is achieved with such families. (Originally, this programme was to be headed up by Emma Harrison, who has already become a multi-millionaire at public expense through her company A4e (Action for Employment), and whom Cameron

[7] http://blogs.birminghampost.net/news/2011/12/how-many-troubled-families-liv.html

[8] Department for Education (2011) Indicative distribution of Families with Multiple Problems (FMP), http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/doc/e/estimated%20distribution%20of%20families%20with%20multiple%20problems%20as%20at%20march%2011.doc

described as an 'inspiration':[9] Harrison resigned due to extensive negative publicity about the company in early 2012.)

In early March 2012 The DCLG was still 'working on a definition of turning round a family', but broadly speaking it means 'getting children back into the classroom and not wandering the streets committing crime or anti-social behaviour'; 'getting parents onto a work programme' – notwithstanding the prevalence of physical and mental ill-health in this group; and reducing the costs to the taxpayer. This latter is, of course, already being effected by removing people from incapacity benefit, and capping housing benefit which will increase the numbers in inadequate housing but lower the costs.

Later that month, the DCLG published the financial framework of the Troubled Families programme. It defined troubled families as households which:

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.[10]

The definition of 'not in school' uses the criterion of exclusion from school or 'persistent absence'. The definition of persistent absence was changed inb 2011 from 20 per cent to 15 per cent absence, widening the pool of affected children from 184,000 to 430,000 each year. These figures include severely disabled/sick children who miss school due to ill-health.[11] Financial payments to local authorities are dependent on reducing anti-social behaviour and school absences. They are also dependent on achieving either attachment to the work programme or continuous employment. Unemployment and benefit dependency are thus defined, even in the context of rapidly rising unemployment, as pathological behaviours on the part of individuals.

As we have seen, 'troubled families' discursively collapses 'families with troubles' and 'troublesome families', while simultaneously implying that they are dysfunctional as families. This discursive strategy is successful in feeding vindictive attitudes to the poor. Many on-line comments are unpleasant and hostile.

'What a waste of money. Again, money given to people who don't deserve it and who get enough anyway. What about the struggling working people and

[9] David Cameron 'Troubled Families Speech', 15 December 2011, http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/troubled-families-speech/
[10] http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/2117840.pdf, p. 3.
[11] http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/persistent%20absence%20briefing%20note.pdf

the elderly, whose care is being cut. Do you really think these "problem" families are going to respond?'[12]

'Surely it would be more cost effective to fall back on that tried and tested method beloved of the British in centuries past - namely transportation. … by populating the hitherto unpopulated South Sandwich Islands with 120,000 of our most - wait for it - "challenging" families'.[13]

'[A]s a former street cop, at the 'sharp end' I would deal with these people most days. We need to do two things to try and start to combat these kind of families.
1. Stop state sponsored bastardism. Not a nice term, but the state are rewarding this scum to breed by giving them cash (our cash) to breed, and they do it very well.
2. Tough quick vicious punishment. The BIRCH, they have nothing to loose, they fear nothing but brute force and ignorance that is their way of life. For too long we have tried the soft, spineless approach, they percieve (sic) that as weakness and it encourages them further.'[14]

'Are these the troubled families that both (if known and together) have never worked and don't want to work, given every benefit that's known to man, they have between 3 and 6 kids all under the ages of 12, live rent free council tax free, free school meals, beer money, disability money, the list goes on and on! Yes there troubled, and the reason for them being like this is every thing is given to them on a plate and generation after generation these families are dragged up and YOU the working tax payer keeps them in this lavish way of living.'[15]

And simply

'Why is the headline not … trouble MAKING families?'[16]

There are of course also a few other responses that are more sceptical about blaming the poor in this way, and point to the dysfunctionality and social costs of the rich, and the monarchy in particular. Thus:

---

[12] http://www.liverpoolconfidential.co.uk/News-and-Comment/Cameron-plans-to-tackle-troubled-Mersey-families
[13] http://blogs.news.sky.com/familyaffairs/Post:0fd4e786-3b6b-4d33-b23d-9b53305c3046
[14] http://blogs.news.sky.com/familyaffairs/Post:0fd4e786-3b6b-4d33-b23d-9b53305c3046
[15] http://www.ripleyandheanornews.co.uk/news/local/bid_to_deal_with_derbyshire_s_troubled_families_1_4070182#
[16] http://www.ripleyandheanornews.co.uk/news/local/bid_to_deal_with_derbyshire_s_troubled_families_1_4070182#

'There's also a foreign family in Windsor that are given multi-million pound handouts as well as priority for public sector jobs. They also get a whole range of other privileges, and can grant those privileges to other people. The family is highly dysfunctional and has spawned a number of feckless and highly damaged individuals which are further burden on the state. They are in for a shock when the government's cap of £26,000 per family comes in, although they will probably exempt themselves.'[17]

'The 120,000-odd families that are causing the most problems and costing the country the most money are those overprivileged, tax-dodging ones than move in the tiny milieu in which Cameron, Osborne et al live'.[18]

The '120,000 families' identified in the original SETF report do indeed have troubles: physical and mental ill-health, poor housing, income poverty, material deprivation. And, as Ogden Nash said, 'a trouble is a trouble is a trouble, and it's twice the trouble when a person is poor'. The leap to treating them as 'troublesome families', bears little relation to the original criteria of multiple disadvantage on which the figure is based. Is there anything in that SETF report that would explain the slippage from the criteria of multiple deprivation to those of anti-social behaviour? Yes and no, though mostly no. There is some discussion, though not very much, of anti-social behaviour. It looks at families 'experiencing problems', and reports on the 'likelihood of poor child outcomes by age 14 by the 'number of family disadvantages'. It found that those experiencing five or more disadvantages were significantly more likely to be excluded from school, to have spent time in care, or to have been in contact with the police. The report did also attribute some costs, including noting that anti-social behaviour was estimated to cost the public £3.4 billion a year and that the annual cost of school exclusion was estimated at £406 million. It did not, however, suggest that these costs could be largely attributed to the 120,000 families experiencing multiple deprivation. Indeed, quite the opposite could be said to follow: one of the report's authors recently blogged that while the chances of being in trouble with the police were much higher for those from families with multiple disadvantages than from families with no disadvantage at all, it nevertheless applied to only 10 per cent of those aged 11-15. In other words, 90 per cent of that age group, even from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, had not been in contact with the police at all.[19]

However, this analysis of 'poor child outcomes' was not based on the FACS data set, but on a quite different analysis of The Millennium Cohort Study and the National Longitudinal Survey of Young People, undertaken for a report from HM Treasury and the Department for Education and Skills, *Policy review of children and young people: A discussion paper.* It is not comparable to the

[17] http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a86dae46-5648-11e1-8dfa-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1pa7Is5Nf
[18] http://www.liverpoolconfidential.co.uk/News-and-Comment/Cameron-plans-to-tackle-troubled-Mersey-families
[19] Matt Barnes, http://natcenblog.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/is-helping-troubled-families-answer-to.html

FACS analysis that generated the 120,000 figure. The set of family disadvantages used, listed below, is significantly different from that used in the FACS analysis:

mental health;
physical disability;
substance misuse;
domestic violence;
financial stress;
neither parent in work;
teenage parenthood;
poor basic skills;
living in poor housing conditions.

The analysis shows that children aged 13 to 14 years who live in families with five or more of these problems are 36 times more likely to be excluded from school than children in families with no problems and six times more likely to have been in care or to have contact with the police. It also showed that the persistence of multiple risk factors throughout childhood was associated with a much higher risk of poor outcomes at age 30. The original analyses were carried out by Leon Feinstein and Ricardo Sabatier.[20] Feinstein was alert to the dangers of stigmatisation arising from policy based on this research. He said that it was important to design interventions in ways 'which do not stigmatise those whose need justifies extra support. Any system of early intervention runs the risk of stigmatising those in receipt of the intervention but this must be minimised and seen in the light of the alternative risk, that of ignoring need, risk persistence and inequality and so allowing the propagation of disadvantage with all the resulting personal and social costs that brings.'[21]

The *Policy review of children and young people* also refers to 'a small minority of families with multiple, severe problems' and says that it 'confirms existing evidence that the more problems present in a family the greater the likelihood that their children are also experiencing poor outcomes'. Moreover, the presence of multiple problems can often reinforce the severity of individual problems': a trouble is a trouble is a trouble and it's twice the trouble if you have other troubles as well. It goes on to say that:

> It is important that the Government supports effectively those families with multiple problems who are already experiencing poor outcomes because: their family environment is harmful to themselves and to their

[20] Feinstein, L (16 October 2006), *Predicting adult life outcomes from earlier signals: Modelling pathways through childhood* (report for HM Treasury; version 1.3), Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London; and Feinstein, L and Sabates, R (30 October 2006), *The prevalence of multiple deprivation for children in the UK: Analysis of the Millennium Cohort and Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England* (report for HM Treasury, version 1.4), Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London.
[21] Feinstein, 2006, p. i

> children – generating a cycle of deteriorating outcomes between household members and across generations; they can create harm to their local communities, for example, if family members are involved in anti-social behaviour or crime; and these families need or are using significant resources from public services, representing a high cost to the taxpayer and a diversion of funding away from more preventative services. The challenge for public services to support these families effectively can be considerable. For example, to make a sustainable difference to outcomes it may be necessary to tackle all the problems of the family together or at the same time. [22]

There is much continuity here, although it merely says such families can create harm, not that they inevitably do so. It too is concerned with cost. For example, 'It is estimated that if attainment of all children in care could be raised to that of all children, there might be a gain to society of around £6 billion in terms of increased productivity over these children's lifetimes. An attainment 'uplift', to the level of children eligible for free school meals might still yield a gain of around £3.5 billion'. It comments on the costs of teenage pregnancy and youth offending, and the lifetime costs of young people not being in Employment Education or Training. But it does not attribute all these costs to a tiny minority of families. Nor does it compare this with the cost of child poverty which, at up to £25 billion a year, far outstrips these figures.[23]

It is evident, then, from excavating the reports and analyses on which current rhetoric about 120,000 'troubled families' and the costs they impose on society, that the Coalition misrepresents the research background. In the term 'troubled families' it deliberately conflates families experiencing multiple disadvantage and families that cause trouble. The attributed costings are obscure and certainly open to question.

The Social Justice Strategy is focussed on the small group of problem families invented by this misreading of research findings. It does concede that 'On a wider definition, analysis from household survey data found that 11 per cent of adults (5.3 million people) in the UK experience, at any one time, three or more of six areas of disadvantage (education, health, employment, income, social support, housing and local environment).'[24] Coalition policy, however, has been demonstrated to entail rising unemployment, reductions and restrictions in benefits, and in particular an assault on the living standards of families with children. If we take the three measures of child poverty, in 2009/10 there were 2.8 million children below 60% of the median, 1.6 million in absolute poverty and 2.0 million on low income and deprived and 0.7 million on very low income and deprived. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) predicts that as a result of coalition policies the numbers in absolute poverty are increasing and those in relative poverty will increase after 2013: 'The

[22] HMTreasury and Department for Education and Skills (2007) *Policy review of children and young people: a discussion paper,* p.8
[23] See http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/estimating-costs-child-poverty and http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/2303-poverty-services-costs.pdf
[24] DWP 2012, p. 8

largest average losses from the 2012–13 reforms as a percentage of income will be among those in the bottom half of the income distribution. Households with children are set to lose the most from the reforms'.[25]

We do indeed need to set our sights more widely, while continuing to challenge the abuse of work undertaken by academics and civil servants.

[25] Robert Joyce (2012) *Tax and benefit reforms due in 2012-13, and the outlook for household incomes*, IFS Briefing Note BN126, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, p. 2.

All websites accessed 19 March 2012 / 16 April 2012