

Turning lives around? The Troubled Families Programme

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Introduction

Announced in the aftermath of the 2011 August riots, the Troubled Families Programme (TFP) sought to 'turnaround the lives of 120,000 of the most troubled families in England' (Cameron, 2011). This article critically reviews the programme's aims and approach.

The Troubled Families Programme

In his post-riots speech, PM David Cameron announced 'urgent action on what some people call problem and others call troubled families' (Cameron, 2011). This led to the cross-departmental Troubled Families Programme (TFP), headed by the Department of Community and Local Government (DCLG), supported by £448 million of central government funding. The primary target group was highly specific – families with co-occurring problems of household welfare reliance; school exclusion, truancy and persistence school absence problems; and youth convictions or youth and/or adult anti-social behaviour problems (DCLG, 2012a). Local authorities (LAs) could also refer families that 'placed a high cost on local services'; experienced two out of the three problems listed above; and/or had 'high health needs' which included substance misuse problems, domestic violence and teenage pregnancy (Ibid).

The DCLG provided LAs in England with a target number of families to 'turn around' by May 2015 (DCLG, 2014a). LAs received funding for engaging families and for 'turning their lives around' measured in terms of:

- fewer school exclusions and improved school attendance over three school terms;
- 60% less anti-social behaviour interventions and 33% less offending;

social alarm about a growing social underclass. Cameron described the parents of young people involved in the riots as 'often welfare reliant single mothers', and the young people themselves as 'repeatedly failing in schools', often living 'without fathers' and 'without discipline' and as 'never wanting to work' (Cameron, 2011). This rhetoric strongly links social deviance, welfare reliance and lone motherhood – understating the diversity of the backgrounds of those involved, the role of peer and social media influences, and the complex socio-economic, local-specific and individual factors that were significant.

The social and economic threats posed by the social underclass were emphasised:

'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' (Pickles, 2011).

The target figure of 120,000 troubled families derived from the *Families at Risk Review* (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007) which stated there were around 140,000 family households in the UK (117,000 in England), 2% of family households overall, affected by five or more of the following: household welfare reliance; poor/overcrowded housing; adults have no qualifications; mother has mental health problems; an adult has long-term health problems and/or disabilities; low income household; and family cannot afford food and clothing items. This was a dynamic figure, with an estimated 40,000 families moving in and out of this category each year (Ibid). These findings were based on data collected in 2004 by the former Family and Children's Survey (FACS), a representative longitudinal survey

- participation in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) welfare to work schemes and/or the end of a period welfare benefit receipt and the take up of paid work for six months (the latter secured the highest results payment overall);
- and/or, reductions in the cost of statutory measures associated with family problems (DCLG, 2012a).

The DCLG provided up to £4,000 total funding per family, an estimated 40% of the total average cost of intensive family interventions.

LAs had much discretion about local service approach. However, they were required to refer welfare recipients to the DWP's welfare to work programmes. Further, DCLG guidance promoted the former Family Intervention Projects, (FIPs) approach to time-limited, goal-orientated, assertive family support and family key worker/lead professional roles (DCLG, 2012b).

By October 2014, 117,689 families had been referred to local TFPs, of which 85,303 had been 'turned around' (DCLG, 2014a). The majority had achieved the educational and crime reduction/prevention targets (77,270 families) while 7,347 included individuals engaged with DWP Work Programmes and 8,033 included individuals, previously in receipt of welfare benefits, who had ended claims and taken up employment for six months (Ibid). Deemed a success, the Government announced the 'Extended Troubled Families Programme' (ETFP), pledging additional central government funding for its delivery starting in 2015/6 and broadening the programme's target group (DCLG, 2014b).

The TFP and social underclass politics

While a more in-depth review of local reforms, service user experiences and programme cost-effectiveness needs to await the findings of national and local evaluations, this section critiques the social underclass perspectives that inform the TFP aims and approach. Somewhat akin to the opportunism of some involved in the August riots, the Coalition acted opportunistically in the post-riots period to increase

of 7,000 UK families. The figure, however, did not include data about 'troublesome families'. It would be better described as reflecting family households with multiple socio-economic, health and disability problems and adversities. Not reflected in this estimate was the FACS data about youth convictions and police warnings among families in the year prior to survey completion. Its findings suggested around 0.4% of UK families, around 28,000 families in 2004, were affected by this issue – a much smaller number. Nevertheless, researchers have warned that these figures are rough estimates due to issues such as the original sample size. The data is also out of date. Likewise, the DCLG (2013) claimed troubled families cost £9 billion a year, £75,000 per family in welfare and public service intervention costs. However, this estimate has been criticised as crude, given limitations in local comparable data.

Politically, social underclass perspectives sought to discredit alternative explanations for the August riots while at the same time mobilise support within and beyond the Coalition parties (divided over approaches to state intervention in families, especially among Conservatives) to take forward Coalition agreements to reform services for 'families with multiple problems' (HM Government, 2010: 19). However, they provide an insufficient basis for understanding and intervening in the lives of children and families with multiple, compounding socio-economic and psycho-social problems and adversities.

Turning lives around?

The DCLG programme data, reported above, claimed 73% of the target number of families were 'turned around' by October 2014 – the large majority of which (90%) achieved educational and crime prevention related targets while 17% achieved welfare to work and employment related targets. However, the educational and crime prevention targets sought to reduce problems sufficiently to reduce the need for statutory interventions such as school exclusions or Police interventions. Youth and family problems could remain relatively severe. The employment related targets sought to refer those in receipt of out of welfare benefits to DWP welfare to work

schemes, reduce household welfare reliance and increase employment rates. But they were not accompanied by assessments of individual and household income or the impact of these changes for children, young people, parents and family households. With 63% of children living in relative household poverty in 2012/13 having at least one parent in paid work (DWP, 2014); employment earnings and prospects differentiated by gender, ethnicity and disability as well as other sources of social difference and inequality; young people at high risk of low wages and insecure employment; and families with children navigating rising childcare and living costs – there is a substantial need to evaluate and promote the degree to which employment secures higher incomes for young people, mothers and families.

A further programme aim was to reduce the demand for, and costs of, statutory measures and interventions among families, including those associated with child protection referrals, assessments and interventions. However, this places a premise on short-term reductions in service demand and costs, when for child-centred reasons, it is vitally important TFP practitioners are vigilant, and respond adequately to concerns about children's welfare and that they are able to facilitate individual and family access to welfare benefit entitlements, specialist health service provision, special educational needs assessments or social housing applications to address pressing social needs. The emphasis on short-term limited support is potentially harmful to child and family welfare, a concern which is exasperated by reduced welfare and family benefits for families (due to the Coalition's welfare reforms) and cutbacks elsewhere in children's services. The latter can restrict the capacity of other services to respond to problems and concerns in children's and parents' lives, particularly at an earlier stage before problems become severe and at which support could be more cost-effective.

This 'short, sharp, shock' approach to intensive family intervention orientated primarily towards reduced demands and costs on the welfare system and children's services also neglects the need for reforms in specialist children's and

family services to: address gaps in specialist child and adult services, better support professional training, development and supervision; recognise challenges for inter-agency working between services; and ensure support is adequately tailored to family needs and circumstances based on anti-discrimination principles and comprehensive needs and risk assessments. Indeed the aims of the Extended TFP appears to include taking over the family support roles of professionals that have well established expertise in this area – such as social workers – with little national guidance or regulation around professional training, qualifications or workforce development.

Further, the TFP approach to programme evaluation makes it difficult to assess these concerns. The DCLG only requested LAs report total aggregate data about families identified and families 'turned around'. This means that unless LAs have maintained records linking family details, family data and aggregate data; it is not possible to evaluate the longer term nature of family circumstances. This is seriously problematic given the issues around repeat referrals and short-term service responses the TFP claims to address.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the TFP provides a limited conception of, and framework for, improving the lives of young people and families with multiple, compounding socio-economic and psycho-social problems and adversities. This is due to the significance of social underclass perspectives, committed to residual social policies. Alternative starting points for reform require more multi-dimensional individual-social-structural explanations for child and family problems which recognise the compounding nature of socio-economic, health and behavioural problems and adversities. Policy responses could better build on the growing expertise among specialist practitioners and services in this field, but require more investment and considered reform. They should include early intervention and prevention initiatives. Wide-ranging socio-economic policies and reforms are also needed to address high rates of material disadvantage and

wide social inequalities. Given the scale of these problems in the UK context and the increasing recognition of the importance of a 'good childhood', there is a pressing need for greater political commitment to, and social investment in, harnessing the transformative scope of the welfare state to improve children's lives and prospects, and better support parents and families.

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