“Bridge over troubled water”

What we don’t know about those 80,000 post-war “problem families”

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“Getting with the Programme”
Durham University, 11 February 2015
80,000 “Problem families”

The P[acifist] S[ervice] U[nit] method applied to the estimated 80,000 “social problem” families would cost about £2,500,000 a year, for results which the authors of the report clearly regard as extremely doubtful.

There remains a hard core of families, mostly well known to the authorities, who seem beyond help. These are the “social problem” families who make up between 1 and 3 per cent of the population in most places where they have been investigated.

Source: The Times, 18 June 1948

Image: ‘Children, juvenile wreckers in Parker Street, Moss Side’ by D Wildgoose, 1972 Manchester Local Image Collection, m48766
Women’s Group on Public Welfare, 1943-1948

“Neglected Child”

Although the child’s welfare will be the object in view, the approach will be through the family and the understanding of its need.

Source: WGPW, The neglected child and his family (Oxford, 1948), p. 121

WGPW, The neglected child and his family (Oxford, 1948)

“Problem Family”

WGPW, Our towns: a close-up (Oxford, 1943)

Image: ‘Evacuation of schools arriving at London Road Station’ by unknown, 1939 Manchester Local Image Collection, m09915
“Friendship with a Purpose”

Pacifist and Family Service Units

During the war, at Liverpool and Manchester, pioneer experimental efforts to develop methods of rehabilitating such families through intensive and patient personal service, combined with practical assistance and social education in the home, have yielded encouraging results.


No one symptom or member of the family can be singled out and treated if the whole welfare of the family is to be improved. The rehabilitation of problem families demands an adaptable and imaginative service which can cope effectively with all the complexities of family life without the limitation of red tape or orthodoxy.


Image: ‘Low Moor, slum clearance’ by unknown, 1951 Manchester Local Image Collection, m08285
“...flood the dark places with light...”

Knowing the “problem family”: social workers

E T Ashton, Social Worker, Southampton, 1956

E E Irvine, Psychiatric Social Worker at Tavistock Clinic, London, 1954

T G Rankin, Psychiatric Social Worker at Birmingham Child Guidance Clinic, 1956

T Stephens, Family Service Unit Caseworker, Liverpool, 1946

E T Ashton, Social Worker, Southampton, 1956

F Bodman, Psychiatric Social Worker, Somerset, 1958

“...flood the dark places with light...”

Knowing the “problem family”: Medical Officers

S W Savage, County Medical Officer for Herefordshire, 1946
C G Tomlinson, Deputy Medical Officer of Health for Luton, 1946
C O Stallbyrass, Assistant Medical Officer of Health for Liverpool, 1947
C F Brockington, County Medical Officer for the West Riding of Yorkshire, 1947
R C Wofinden, Medical Officer of Health for Bristol, 1950
J A Scott, County Medical Officer for London, 1956

“The problem of the ‘problem family’”

Knowing the “problem family”: critics

A F Philip, Family Service Unit caseworker, 1957
N Timms, Social Work Lecturer, 1957
D V Donnison, Social Policy Lecturer, 1957
B Wootton, Sociologist and Criminologist, 1959
ACCO (Association of Child Care Officers), 1964

Image: ‘1950s family’ by unknown, c. 1958 permission courteous of Getty Images, Ofcom 31 July 2013
Problem family “policy”?
Welfare state 1948-52: children first

1948 Children Act
Children ‘deprived of a normal home life’

1950 Joint Circular
If effective help is to be given [to problem families] at an early stage, it is essential that there should be co-ordinated use of the statutory and voluntary services.

1952 Children and Young Persons (Amendment) Act
It shall be the duty of the local authority to cause enquiries to be made into the case.


Source: Children and Young Persons (Amendment) Act 1952, ch. 50, para 2

Problem family “policy”?  
Welfare state 1952-63: families first  

1954 Ministry of Health Circular  
...early signs of failure in the family which may lead to the disrupting of normal home life with consequent risk to the mental health of children.  


1959 Joint Circular  
It is common ground among all those dealing with homeless families that, where there are children, the overriding consideration must be to make every effort to keep the family together as a unit and to avoid the damaging consequences which so often result from a broken home.  


Image: ‘Slum clearance, Moss Side’, by D Wildgoose, 1974 Manchester Local Image Collection, m08275
Problem family “policy”?

Welfare state 1963-69: Exchequer first

1963 Children and Young Persons Act
It shall be the duty of every local authority to make available such advice, guidance and assistance as may promote the welfare of children by diminishing the need to receive children into care... or to bring them before a juvenile court...

...and any provisions made by a local authority under this subsection may, if the local authority think fit, include provision for giving assistance in kind or, in exceptional circumstances, in cash.

Source: Children and Young Persons Act, 1963, ch. 37, part 1, section 1, para 1
“Problem family” histories

(1) Elastic and subjective definitions and identifications of the “problem family” shapes local understanding.

(2) Prioritising marriage and creating a “normal family” is the continuing preoccupation of social discourse, policy and intervention for solving all problems.

(3) Notions of “at risk”, “prevention” and “early intervention” depend on differentiating between “normal” and “problem” family as understood by social services.

(4) Single caseworker to befriend the family seen as best way to make this differentiation rather than competing agencies with conflicting views.

(5) “Problem families” a continuing operational assumption.

“Bridge over troubled water”

The new programme of work with 120,000 troubled families is an opportunity to not repeat the failed attempts of the past, but to get underneath the skin of the families, and of the services that are now going to be working with them to find some lasting ways to make changes.

...at the most fundamental level is an absence of basic family functioning which must be restored (or created for the first time) if these families are to really change.

Source: L Casey, Listening to troubled families (London, 2012), p. 3

Source: L Casey, Listening to troubled families (London, 2012), p. 64

Trouble with “Problem families”? 

The actual syndromes described, moreover, appear to reflect not only the objective facts of problem family life, but also in equal measure the subjective interests of the investigators concerned. 

Source: B Wootton, Social science and social pathology (London, 1959), p. 57