The Troubled Families Programme

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CIH Lunch & Learn
8 September 2016
The long history...

‘Ever since the happy sixteenth-century custom of chopping off the ears of vagabonds, rogues and sturdy beggars, the British have had some difficulty in distinguishing poverty from crime’

(Golding & Middleton, 1982: 186)
The long history...

- 1880s  Victorian residuum
- 1910s  The unemployables
- 1930s  Social Problem Group
- 1940s  The ‘problem family’
- 1960s  Culture of poverty
- 1970s  Cycle of deprivation
- 1980s  Underclass
- 1990s  Socially excluded

Welshman (2013)
‘Troubled families’

“... 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’.

Cameron (2011)
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.”

Cameron (2011)
The problem, particularly in the past ten years, has actually been an excess of unthinking, impersonal welfare. Put simply: tens of thousands of troubled families have been subjected to a sort of compassionate cruelty, swamped with bureaucracy, smothered in welfare yet never able to escape.

Cameron (2011)
The ‘family intervention’ model

“Looking at the family ‘from inside out rather than outside in’”

“One family. One plan. One worker”

“a clear hard-headed recognition of how the family is going wrong”

DCLG (2012)
The ‘family intervention’ model

“... get into the actual family, in their front room and if actually the kids aren’t in school it gets in there and says to the parents I’m gonna show you and explain to you exactly how to get your kids up and out every single day and then I’m gonna make you do it. And if you don’t do it, there are gonna be consequences.”

Casey (2013)
Delivered by local authorities (Phase 1)

- Named Troubled Families Co-ordinator
- ‘Target’ numbers of ‘troubled families’
- Payment by Results model – ‘turning around’ families
- Regular progress reporting
- Local filter criteria in addition to national criteria

- No new legislation/statutory guidance
A ‘massive expansion’ (Phase 2)

- Families ‘problems’ ‘worse than originally thought’
- 400,000 more ‘troubled families’
- New criteria
- PbR model adapted to families ‘making significant and sustainable progress’

- Inclusion in Welfare Reform & Work Act 2016
A ‘real government success’...

Our troubled families programme ... has changed lives. By radically changing the way we deliver services to the hardest-to-reach families in our country, we have tackled worklessness, addiction, truancy and anti-social behaviour.

This is a real government success, and I want to extend this thinking to areas where state institutions have all too often failed.

Cameron (2015)
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 ...

In the term ‘troubled families’ (the government) deliberately conflates families experiencing multiple disadvantage and families that cause trouble.”

Levitas (2012: 4/12)
The ‘evidence’ on ‘family intervention’

- claims for success were based on qualitative measures and very small family samples which the evaluators conceded were biased;
- no control groups were used and much of the evidence relied on the views of those involved with the project;
- and, no longitudinal studies had been commissioned despite three sets of researchers suggesting that such an approach would help to address questions about the longevity of any improvements in the longer term.

Gregg (2010: 15)
‘Neighbours from hell’?

- 78% were not at risk of eviction for any reason
- 71% of those living in rented accommodation were not in rent arrears
- 58% of families had no police callouts in the previous 6 months
- 89% of families had no adult subject to an ASB intervention
- 77% of families did not have any children identified as being children in need

Crossley (2014: 5)
The perfect social policy?

No social policy can expect to achieve a 100 per cent success rate and yet, according to government, the Troubled Families Programme has achieved almost exactly that ... the reported successes of the Troubled Families Programme are too good to be true.

Crossley (2015: 1)
NE responses to the programme

- Largely supportive of the programme (and the resources it brings)
- High ‘success’ rates – 11 of 12 NE LAs reported 100% success rates in Phase 1
- Half of the regions’ LAs were ‘early adopters’ for Phase 2
- Different methods of implementation and delivery
Efforts to ‘soften’ the discourse…

“It is unfortunate that the Government has branded this work ‘Troubled Families’. In Rotherham we will seek to respond with a more positive ‘Think Family’ / ‘Families for Change’ message that is aligned with the identity of the work in disadvantaged areas.”
But does it work?

- Evidence on ‘family intervention’ very ambiguous
- Data matching to ‘turn around’ families
- Pressure applied to local authorities
- What we know about PbR and opportunities to ‘game the system’
- ‘Neighbours from hell’?
- Around 11% families ‘back in work’…
The official evaluation…

A senior civil servant told Newsnight that the report is “damning”, and attacked the scheme as “window-dressing” …

“The lack of obvious effect from the programme across a range of outcomes indicates that the programme did not have a measurable impact on families within the time-frame over which it was possible to observe its effects.”

Cook (2016)
‘No discernible impact’...

- no discernible impact on the percentage of adults claiming out-of-work benefits
- no obvious impact on the likelihood that adults were employed 12 or 18 months after starting on the programme
- did not have any discernible impact on adult offending seven to 18 months after the family was booked into the programme
- the findings suggested that the programme also had no detectable impact on child offending
- any impact that the programme had on the absence rate was not robust

Cook (2016)
The ‘end of history’?

If the Troubled Families Programme really does ‘turn round’ the lives of all families it works with, we are witnessing the ‘end of history’.

History thus far, has demonstrated that such approaches do not universally ‘work’, especially without addressing structural causes as well (or whilst making them worse).
A programme for who?

The individualisation – or familialisation – of social problems is not a rough edge that can be smoothed off the programme by local practice or small policy ‘tweaks’.

The symbolic and political impact of the Troubled Families Programme reaches far beyond the families, workers and local services involved in its delivery.
References


Contact details / further reading

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‘Looking for trouble?’
The role of the voluntary sector in the Troubled Families Programme

The government’s Troubled Families Programme is one of the most high-profile and contentious social policies in recent years. Although it is managed by the Department for Communities and Local Government and administered by local authorities, the voluntary sector has played a key role at various points in its development and implementation. This paper adopts a critical stance and examines, for example, the role of the voluntary sector in:
- promoting previous constructions of ‘an underclass’;
- the development of the ‘family intervention’ model in a voluntary sector project in Dundee;
- providing enthusiastic support for the Troubled Families Programme despite numerous criticisms of it.

Thursday 29th September 2016, 3PM-5PM
Room 035, Lipman Building, Northumbria University
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