

# (Mis)Understanding ‘troubled families’<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Crossley, School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University

[s.j.crossley@durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.j.crossley@durham.ac.uk)

## Background

In August 2014, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) published a report called *Understanding Troubled Families*<sup>2</sup>. The report – and the data the accompanying it – has been used to suggest that the problems of the 120,000 ‘troubled families’ originally identified by the government were greater than first thought and to justify the ‘massive expansion’ of the Troubled Families Programme to include a further 400,000 families. This working paper highlights three issues relating to the report which should be of concern:

1. The quality of the data behind the report
2. The misrepresentation of the data in the report
3. The uses of the report and data

## The quality of the data

The Troubled Families Programme has been beset by problems with the data and ‘evidence’ associated with the work. Ruth Levitas<sup>3</sup> and Jonathan Portes<sup>4</sup> both highlighted that the original figure of 120,000 families related to families suffering ‘multiple disadvantages’ and not families causing problems for other people. Levitas<sup>5</sup> and Paul Spicker<sup>6</sup> have highlighted that the figures associated with the programme are not ‘official statistics’ and are therefore potentially unable to be scrutinised by the UK Statistics Authority. Spicker argued that use of the figures ‘*opens the door to the possibility that there will be two sorts of official statistics – the formal sort, which meet professional standards, and the others which don’t*’ (p51). Louise Casey’s report *Listening to Troubled Families* was heavily criticised for not having followed any ethical approval process.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The briefing note includes material that was first posted as a four part blog series at [www.akindoftrouble.wordpress.com](http://www.akindoftrouble.wordpress.com)

<sup>2</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/336430/Understanding\\_Troubled\\_Families\\_web\\_format.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336430/Understanding_Troubled_Families_web_format.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.poverty.ac.uk/system/files/WP%20Policy%20Response%20No.3-%20'Trouble'%20ahead%20\(Levitas%20Final%201April2012\).pdf](http://www.poverty.ac.uk/system/files/WP%20Policy%20Response%20No.3-%20'Trouble'%20ahead%20(Levitas%20Final%201April2012).pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.niesr.ac.uk/blog/neighbours-hell-who-prime-minister-talking-about>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Troubled%20Families%20in%20a%20Spin.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.radstats.org.uk/no108/Spicker108.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/oct/24/families-tsar-louise-casey-criticised>

Despite, Casey, the Director General leading on the Troubled Families Programme (TFP) writing in the foreword to the *Understanding Troubled Families* report that ‘These are **statistics** to be concerned about’ (p4) and telling the Sunday Times that ‘this is the first time we have been able to **evidence** the extent of the problems’ (emphases added), the ‘Family Monitoring Data’ which was used to support the report falls into the ‘unofficial’ statistics group and perhaps shouldn’t be called ‘evidence’.

The accompanying interim report<sup>8</sup> from the national evaluation of the TFP, notes that local authorities were asked to ‘randomly select the sample of families for monitoring purposes’ but it was ‘not possible to be certain that families were chosen randomly in all cases’ (p9). It should have been possible to provide a randomisation procedure to all local authorities to ensure some kind of consistency, but only suggestions on how to provide a random sample were provided.

It would appear that local authority key workers provided the data via a standardised template. However, the interim evaluation report<sup>9</sup> states that ‘some data submitted will be local authorities ‘best fit’ to data requested’, that there are ‘many different data collection systems in place, **some of which were not capable of collecting sufficient data in time for this return**’ in local authorities and that some local authorities are involved with ‘retrospective data gathering’ (p5, emphasis added). The use of key workers to collect and provide the data may also not without complication.

The indicators ‘combine both recognised standard measures and those which rely on practitioner intelligence’. In other words, a lot of the information submitted may not have been provided by families themselves or from information held about them by public bodies; some of the information has been provided based on workers *perceptions* of these families. Some of the indicators which rely on ‘practitioner intelligence’ include:

- ‘Parenting difficulties’
- Family members suffering from Domestic Violence or Domestic Abuse
- Adults dependent on non-prescription drugs
- Adults suffering mental health problems
- Children suffering mental health problems
- Adults dependent on alcohol
- Adults with long-standing illness/disability
- Children with long-standing illness/disability

---

<sup>8</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/335261/National\\_Evaluation\\_of\\_report\\_web\\_copy-ecorys.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335261/National_Evaluation_of_report_web_copy-ecorys.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

There are numerous reasons why the information provided in response to these indicators may not be particularly robust. There is no discussion or acknowledgement of the level of training that was given to complete the form and/or deal with any ambiguities, or the level of research training the workers may (or may not) have or the other demands on their time in their work. More specially, there are a number of issues with the data requested. No explanation is given as to what constitutes 'parenting difficulties': even in a guidance document<sup>10</sup> sent to local authorities: the view about what constitutes 'parenting difficulties' is therefore entirely subjective. There are also good reasons why individuals or families may want to hide evidence of Domestic Violence or Abuse (a point which is recognised in the report) and quite how key workers with presumably little medical training can be expected to provide an assessment of mental health, illness/disability or a drug or alcohol dependency is not made clear. Again, there are good reasons why individuals or families may seek to hide this information from key workers, but there is also potential for some key workers to overstate the prevalence of these problems in these 'troubled families'.

When David Cameron launched the programme<sup>11</sup> he said he 'wanted to be clear' what he meant by the term 'troubled families'. He went on to describe some of the issues they face:

*'Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations.'* Louise Casey has written in the *Listening to Troubled Families* report that

*Violence appears in many cases to be endemic – not just domestic violence between parents but violence between siblings, between parent and child, outside the house and inside the house. Violence, verbal and physical abuse was described in an almost matter-of-fact way.*

So it is entirely possible that key workers are looking for issues, or expecting to find them when they are working with 'troubled families' – their senses may well be heightened, one could argue.

There are other examples of why the data shouldn't be trusted, and might not be worthy of presentation and discussion in official government documents. It would appear that at least 10 families were involved in the programme when they didn't meet the national criteria as they experienced 2 or less issues (the criteria for inclusion in the TF programme requires at least three criteria to be met). There are low completion rates (with a high number of 'blank' returns) for some indicators, with, for example, only two of the 16 possible health indicators receiving over 50% completion rates. One local authority provided entry data that was entered entirely in

---

<sup>10</sup> [http://portal.troubledfamilies.org.uk/FMD\\_guidance\\_for\\_national\\_indicator\\_set\\_version1.0.pdf](http://portal.troubledfamilies.org.uk/FMD_guidance_for_national_indicator_set_version1.0.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/troubled-families-speech>

error which resulted in this information being excluded from the analysis. In a section of the interim evaluation report which explores the characteristics of the families, we find out that in 10% of cases, no information was provided regarding the number of children under the age of 5 in each family. We also find out that nearly 30% of responses regarding the families' ethnicity were blank and a further 10% of responses to this indicator were in the 'not known' box. None of these issues suggest a particularly robust data collection approach or methodology and nor do they provide much in the way of quality assurance. In short, the data provided probably shouldn't have been published, or indeed used, by the government in the way that it has been

### Misrepresentation of the data

*'These families are off the barometer in the number of problems they have. We are beginning to achieve a revolution in how you deal with the worst families in Britain – worst in that they have the worst problems. Frankly, they cause the most problems and, frankly, you wouldn't want to live with them'*

Louise Casey in *The Daily Express*, 18 August 2014

When David Cameron launched the Troubled Families Programme in the aftermath of the English riots of 2011, he embellished his speech with a 'true story' of one family where numerous state services had been involved, including the following:

*"The police were called out to their home 58 times, including five arrests and 109 hours of police work ... Two injunctions were issued against tenants. Neighbours kept complaining to the council about disruptive behaviour. Two children were subject to different sets of close supervision by youth offending teams. There was a summons for non-payment of council tax...and on and on it went."*

Since then, 'troubled families' have been linked with a wide variety of social problems including Domestic Violence, teenage pregnancy, children at risk and even violent extremism, leading to the frequent labelling of them as 'dysfunctional' and 'chaotic'. The publication of the *Understanding Troubled Families* report, according to Louise Casey 'paints a picture of families sinking under the weight of multiple problems', which can then 'spiral out of control' if they remain unchecked. The report claimed that, on average, nine serious problems exist in any one family at any one time.

If the concerns about the quality of the data are set to one side and the data is taken at face value, the interpretation and representation of the data should still cause some concern. The *Understanding Troubled Families* report paints a particularly negative picture of these families when, if a different, perhaps less judgemental approach was adopted, a very different picture can begin to emerge. For example, in contrast to the workless 'neighbours from hell' and the

families who are 'off the barometer' in terms of the problems they have, we can find the following from the data in the interim national evaluation report<sup>12</sup>:

- 84% of families had children who were not permanently excluded from school
- 26% of families had at least one adult in work
- 77% of families did not have any young people classified as 'NEET'
- 78% were not at risk of eviction for any reason
- 71% of those living in rented accommodation were not in rent arrears
- 88% of families had no children on a Child Protection Plan
- 77% of children did not have any children identified as being children in need
- 85% of families had no adults with a proven criminal offence in the previous 6 months
- 97% of families had children with either 1 or no criminal offences in the previous 6 months
- 58% of families had no police callouts in the previous 6 months
- 95% of families had no family members identified as being Prolific and Priority Offenders (PPO)
- 89% of families had no adult subject to an ASB intervention
- 93% of families had no identified gang members in the family
- 93% of families had no adults clinically diagnosed as being dependent on alcohol
- 93% of families had no adults clinically diagnosed as being dependent on non-prescription drugs

Whilst these figures show that there are undoubtedly some problems within 'troubled families' they also show that the reality of the families might be somewhat different to the stereotypical, stigmatising image of them put forward by politicians, civil servants and certain sections of the media. The portrayal of these families in this way has consequences, both for the families themselves and for the services working with families identified as being 'troubled'. These families are effectively *Othered* as a result of the representation of them by the state and certain sections of the media. Ruth Lister describes how *Othering* occurs when the 'non-poor' seek to differentiate themselves from 'the poor', when a line is drawn which distinguishes 'us' from 'them'. She notes that

*'Othering is closely associated with, and reinforced by, a number of related social processes such as stereotyping, stigmatization and the more neutral categorization. Stereotyping is a discriminatory form of labelling, which attains a taken-for-granted*

---

12

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/335261/National\\_Evaluation\\_of\\_report\\_web\\_copy-ecorys.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335261/National_Evaluation_of_report_web_copy-ecorys.pdf)

*quality and serves to portray particular groups as homogeneous. It is a discursive strategy that magnifies and distorts difference.*<sup>13</sup>

The example of a police officer stationed on a family's settee being a cheaper option than responding to all of the call-outs associated with them is a familiar one, but the data shows that it is also an entirely inappropriate one to illustrate the experience of the majority of the families being talked about. The data collected relates to families entering the TF programme in its very earliest stages. These were the families that most easily fitted the criteria and were, potentially, the ones already best known to service providers. It is therefore possible to argue that these families may therefore have more 'troubles' than many of the later entrants to the programme.

An alternative reading of the data could therefore suggest that the majority of these 'troubled families' have children who are not excluded from school, are able to care for and bring up their children without statutory intervention of any kind, are not in rent arrears or at risk of eviction and are involved in no – or very low levels of – crime and ASB. Over a quarter of the families were in work within 6 months of the time of entry to the programme despite Casey previously stating that 'We have known that there is a group of families who didn't work in the boom times and won't work in the bust times. They're unemployed; they're dependent on benefits'.<sup>14</sup> As the data suggests, many of them don't match this description and because of the way the data has been collected and reported, we do not know (or are not told) how many of the families had an adult in work in the 7, 8, 9, 12 or 24 months prior to entering the programme.

We do know, however, that people often churn in and out of insecure, low-paid jobs and that 'in work' or 'out-of-work' are not static, unchanging categories<sup>15</sup>, despite the attempt to portray them as such here. The dynamics of poverty<sup>16</sup> are completely ignored. The reason for individuals being out of work is not reported either. Given the health data, it would not be surprising if a large number of families had nobody in work because of limiting illness, disability or caring responsibilities which, again, does not sit particularly easy with the portrayal of families as being unwilling to work.

It should, of course, not be denied that many 'troubled families' lead complex lives or that some families do cause trouble for other people. When a programme specifically and deliberately targets some of our poorest and most disadvantaged families, we shouldn't be surprised when issues such as unemployment, domestic violence, crime, lone parenthood, educational problems and mental health issues can be found. After all, these issues occur across all cross-sections of society. What should, perhaps, be more noteworthy, given the

---

<sup>13</sup> Lister, R. (2004) *Poverty*, Bristol: Policy Press

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.civilserviceworld.com/interview-louise-casey>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/unemployment-pay-poverty-full.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/poverty-dynamics-research-uk>

difficulties they face and the conditions and stresses under which many of them live, is the fact that many of them appear to function reasonably well without succumbing to the ‘Shameless’ stereotype often associated with them. As Ruth Levitas noted<sup>17</sup> in relation to the *Listening to Troubled Families*<sup>18</sup> report written by Casey, ‘Doubtless families with backgrounds and circumstances as difficult as Casey documents exist – although there might be quite other ways of telling their stories’

### The uses of the report and data

The data provided by the local authorities about the families they are working with therefore suggests that many of the families do not appear to correspond with the stereotypical ‘neighbours from hell’ image that was invoked by David Cameron when he launched the programme. In fact, the most common characteristics shared by the families involved with the programme appear to be that they are white, not in work, live in social housing and have a range of health and disability issues. Crime, anti-social behaviour and substance abuse all appear to be characteristics related to a minority of the families. Despite these contradictions, it is these problematic behaviours that have been most strongly associated with ‘troubled families’ and that have been used as justification for both the initial policy response and the recent announcement of an expanded programme to include a further 400,000 families, with Louise Casey arguing that ‘this data also shows how big the challenge is and why we need to take this approach to a wider group of families with a wider set of problems as soon as we can’<sup>19</sup>. National newspaper reports have suggested that the data proves the existence of a ‘new underclass’<sup>20</sup> in England with the alleged cost of the families put at £30 billion, although it was later established that this figure was made up by a journalist<sup>21</sup>.

Many local authorities have sought to distance themselves from the ‘troubled families’ label, attaching different, sometimes more positive sounding names to their local programmes and many don’t inform the families they are working with that they are ‘troubled families’. It is unlikely that the *Othering* of these families aids service delivery at a local level, where family workers are expected to build strong relationships with families. However, the portrayal of ‘troubled families’ as a criminally minded homogeneous group has led to the promotion of a persistent, challenging and assertive approach, based on family intervention models, as the preferred method of working with families. This approach was originally developed to address families at risk of eviction as a result of high levels of anti-social behaviour. The make-up of ‘troubled families, as reported in the *Understanding Troubled Families* report, however, means

---

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/articles-families/still-not-listening>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/6151/2183663.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6151/2183663.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/study-shows-scale-of-troubled-families-problems>

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk\\_news/Society/article1447828.ece](http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/Society/article1447828.ece)

<sup>21</sup> <https://fullfact.org/live/2014/aug/cost-troubled-families-30-billion-not-government-estimate-34735>

that many families with long-standing and debilitating illnesses and/or what appear to be relatively minor crime and ASB issues may be receiving a similar approach, which is based on getting families to change their behaviour. There is little sustained reference within the Troubled Families Programme to specialist services and support which families experiencing issues such as mental health, substance misuse, violence and/or abuse services may need.

Local service providers and frontline workers will, of course, be exercising discretion and using their professional judgement in the implementation of any government policy and this aspect is 'aided' by the lack of statutory guidance associated with the Troubled Families Programme. Workers across a number of public policy areas are known to operate as 'street-level bureaucrats' developing and delivering policy in ways that negotiate, subvert or resist official documents and directives, in order to 'make policy work'. Given the unhelpful negative stereotyping about families, the mismatch between this and the data on families collected by local authorities, the rejection of the 'troubled families' label by most local authorities and the freedom afforded to councils and their employees in the delivery of the programme, it is likely that, in many areas, the programme on the ground will little resemble to the preferred and promoted approach. This disconnect between policy and practice has obvious implications given the high profile nature of the Troubled Families Programme and the plans for its future.

The Troubled Families Programme has been hailed as a success with Eric Pickles calling it a 'brilliant partnership'<sup>22</sup> and Danny Alexander highlighting it as an 'excellent example'<sup>23</sup> of how to 're-think' public services in a time of austerity. This success has then been used as justification for 'rolling out' the 'troubled families' approach to a wider group of families with broader 'troubles', whilst continuing with cuts to local government and other areas which will affect the delivery of more specialist services.

The 'massive expansion' of the TFP was announced just months after the national evaluation was commissioned and before any Family Monitoring data had been received from local authorities. The expansion has begun, in the form of 50 'early adopter' local authorities, before any independent assessment of the success of the first wave of the programme. Despite the lack of evidence about the approach, Louise Casey has said that the TFP has been 'the start of a revolution in the way that we work with our most challenging families' and one which needs 'to accelerate in the years ahead'<sup>24</sup>. It is unfortunate that the programme has been trumpeted as a success and a decision taken to expand it, even whilst people delivering the programme distance themselves from the national discourse and long before its long-term impact on some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised families in England has been assessed.

---

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/troubled-families-programme-expanded-to-help-younger-children>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid