

The trouble with ‘troubled families’

Revisiting the analysis behind the 120,000 troubled families

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Overview

- Backdrop to the research
- Estimating the number of troubled families – recap
- Research aims
- The data (and alternatives)
- Provisional findings

Backdrop



In 2011, in the aftermath of the UK riots

- The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, referred to a *‘small number of families as the source of a large number of problems in society’*



*“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’**. ... 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 with the actual figures. Last year the state spent an estimated £9 billion on just **120,000 families**...” Cameron (2011)*

Policy response

- The launch of the £448M **Troubled Families Programme** in 2012 (DCLG, 2012)
- It aimed to **'turn around'** the 120,000 troubled families
 - get children back into school
 - reduce youth crime and anti-social behaviour
 - put adults on road back to work
 - reduce the high costs these families place on the public sector each year
- TFP uses the **'caseworker'** approach, where one caseworker engages with the whole family on all of its problems, and public services are coordinated
- The TFP was 'on track' 18 months in, and extra funds were made available to extend help to a further 400,000 families ([DCLG, 2013](#))

The Troubled Families Programme: the perfect social policy?
Stephen Crossley

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 programme has apparently turned around the lives of some of the most disadvantaged and excluded families in a remarkably short period of time. All of this has occurred against a backdrop of cuts to local services and welfare reforms which have hit, not just families, but also the organisations and councils that deliver services to them. This briefing paper traces the history of the programme and questions claims of success made by government and their problematic use of data. Quite simply, the reported successes of the Troubled Families Programme are too good to be true and require closer public and political scrutiny than they have received to date.

Department for Communities and Local Government

Results of the first Troubled Families Programme

- The Prime Minister set an ambition to turn around the lives of 120,000 troubled families by May 2015.
- By end May 2015, 116,654 claims had been made for families that had been turned around (i.e demonstrated improved school attendance, and reduced anti-social behaviour and youth offending or an adult moving off benefits and into work)

Families 'turned around'

Date	No. of families achieved success
May 13	1,600
May 14	13,400
May 15	116,654

...and the 'results'

- In 2015 the Prime Minister announced that the programme had succeeded in turning around **99%** of the original 120,000 troubled families

"I can announce today that almost all of the 117,000 families which the programme started working with have now been turned around – in terms of either school attendance or getting a job or both. This has saved as much as £1.2 billion in the process. ([Cameron, 2015](#))

- The perfect social policy? ([Crossley, 2015](#))
- However...in Autumn 2016 the official evaluation of the first 4 years of the programme concluded it had, in fact, **failed to achieve any significant impact** ([Day et al, 2016](#))

"As far as we can tell, there's no evidence at all to suggest the programme had more than zero impact on any of the key findings it was designed to change." ([Portes, 2016](#))

- Public Accounts Committee** enquiry – hearing in October 2016, report due December 2016

This project is not looking at the TF Programme

- Instead it is going back to the beginning...the initial identification of ‘120,000 troubled families’
- It has already been widely debated that this number is **misleading**, a **poor use of evidence** by government, and **stigmatising**.....it identified ‘disadvantaged’ families whereas the policy rhetoric was more about ‘problem/anti-social/criminal’ families
- But, to date, no one has attempted to revisit the data to explore the overlap between ‘troubled’ and ‘trouble’ families

Two studies, now two years old, reached the same broad conclusion: that this is a misuse, even an abuse, of data. The 120,000 represents people who are poor: what the government has counted is people in extreme deprivation, yet what it describes is families who are disruptive. There is no systematic statistical attempt to overlap the poverty with delinquency, yet that is what the euphemistic word “troubled” is meant to convey.

theguardian Zoe Williams (2014)

Under government criteria, a troubled family is one that meets five out of seven criteria: having a low income, no one in the family who is working, poor housing, parents who have no qualifications, where the mother has a mental health problem, one parent has a long-standing illness or disability, and where the family is unable to afford basics, including food and clothes.

As I said at the time



What instantly leaps out from this list? It is that none of these criteria, in themselves, have anything at all to do with disruption, irresponsibility, or crime. Drug addiction and alcohol abuse are also absent. A family which meets 5 of these criteria is certainly disadvantaged. Almost certainly poor. But a source of wider social problems? Maybe, but maybe not - and certainly not as a direct consequence. In other words, the “troubled families” in the Prime Minister’s speech are not necessarily “neighbours from hell” at all. They are poor.

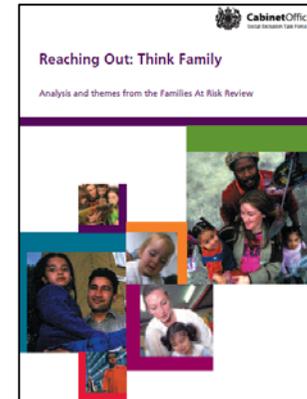


The government has misrepresented research findings on ‘troubled families’, blaming the poor, not coalition policies, for rising poverty levels

The government’s use of multiple deprivation as a proxy for anti-social behaviour implies that poorer people are all potential criminals. Ruth Levitas argues that the government’s policies either illustrate a statistical incompetency or conceal rising levels of poverty spilling from government policy.

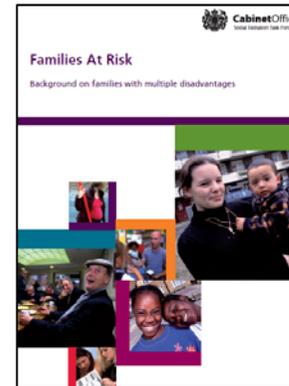
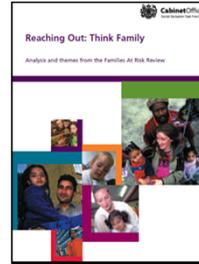


**Reminder – Where did the
120,000 number come from?**



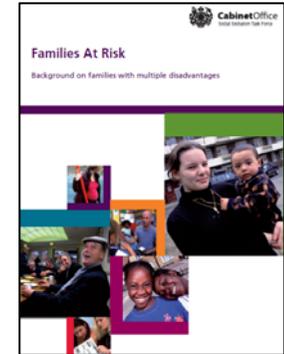
Reaching out: Think Family

- In 2007 (four years before the UK riots) the **Social Exclusion Task Force (SETF)**, Cabinet Office published ***Reaching Out: Think Family***
- This was in response to a multitude of research which shows that those exposed to **multiple adversities** in childhood are at increased, cumulative risk of negative psychological, emotional and health-related outcomes in later life ([Barnados, 2012](#))
- The policy response focused on **early intervention, integrated services** and **whole family approaches** to working with families experiencing multiple adversities e.g. one-to-one support from a **caseworker** who assesses and helps coordinate services to the whole family to help them overcome the full range of problems they face ([Cabinet Office, 2007](#))
- **SETF produced new research to identify how many families faced multiple problems in Britain**

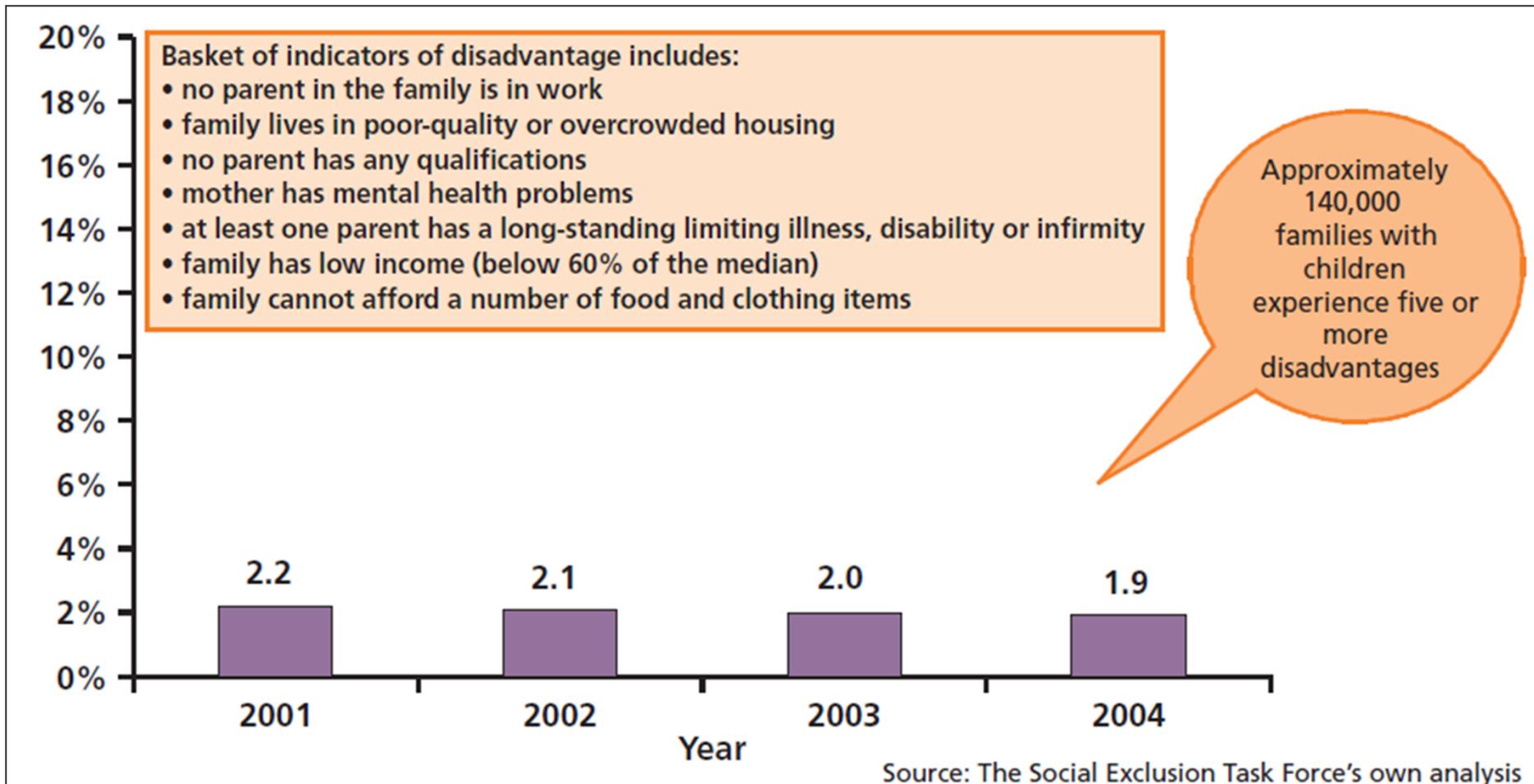


Families at Risk

- The SETF estimated that **2%** of families with children were **families at risk of multiple disadvantage**
- The figure was obtained from secondary analysis of data from more than 7,000 families in Britain who took part in the [2004 Families and Children Survey](#) (FACS)
- A '**family at risk**' was defined as having at least one dependent child and **five or more** of the following list of seven disadvantages:
 1. No parent in the family is in **work**
 2. Family lives in poor-quality or overcrowded **housing**
 3. No parent has any **qualifications**
 4. Mother has **mental health** problems
 5. At least one parent has a long-standing limiting **illness, disability or infirmity**
 6. Family has **low income**
 7. Family **cannot afford** a number of food and clothing items



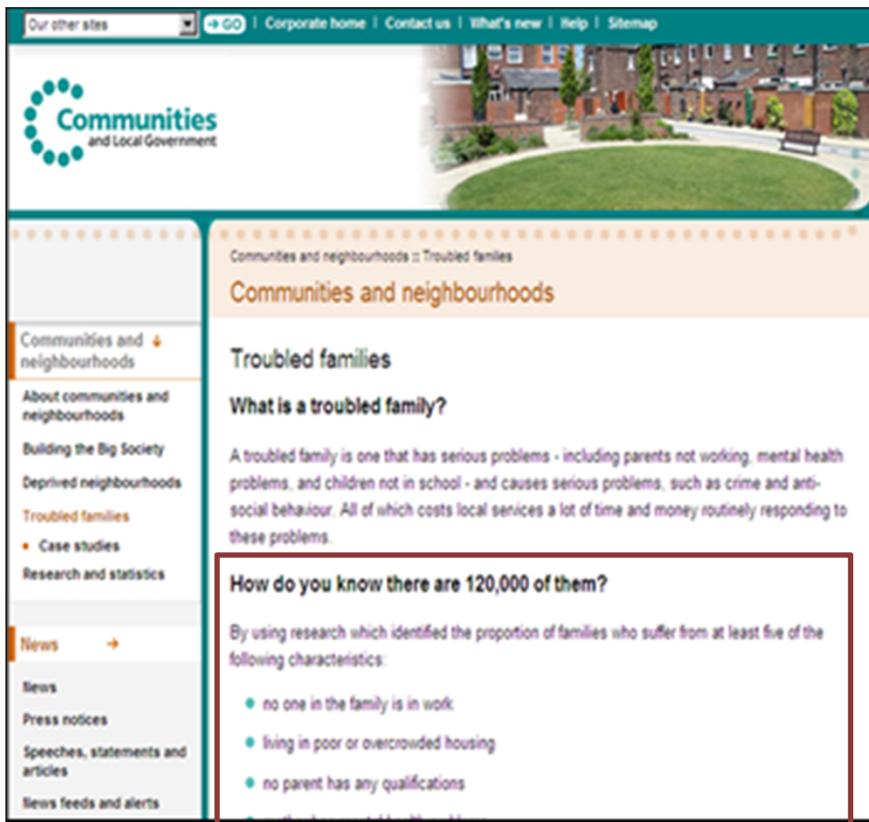
Families at Risk: 2% of families with children have 5 or more disadvantages



[SETF \(2007, p4\) Families at Risk: Background on families with multiple disadvantages](#)

Four years later...

- The riots happened...the Troubled Families Programme was set up...the **Troubled Families Unit (TFU)** was established in the government Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)



- The TFU front page on the **DCLG website** explained what a 'Troubled Family' is and how many there are
- It **quoted directly** the definition used by the SETF Families at Risk research
- The '140,000 families at risk' in Britain had been rescaled/re-labeled for England as '**120,000 troubled families**'
- **I was seconded to SETF (2006-08)**
- **I undertook the analysis of FACS that later became the evidence that there are '120,000 troubled families'**

Research aims

Aims of this new project: The trouble with troubled families – revisiting the analysis

- i. Evaluate the **purpose, derivation and robustness** of the original ‘family at risk (troubled families)’ analysis
- ii. Estimate how many of the original 120,000 ‘**troubled families**’ (i.e. multiply-disadvantaged) were also ‘**trouble families**’ (i.e. displaying criminal/anti-social behaviours)
- iii. Estimate the number of troubled families in England **today** using up-to-date survey data
- iv. Estimate how many **troubled families** today are actually ‘**trouble families**’
- v. Use the analysis to discuss the **misuse** of the ‘120,000 troubled families’ statistic in government rhetoric and resource allocation
- vi. Discuss the **link** between poverty (troubled families) and deviance (trouble families)

So is looking at the 120,000 number still relevant?

- Yes, for a number of reasons:
 - The number was used as **basis** for financial calculations for the programme (£448M)
 - It was also used to help **identify** the number of troubled families local authorities had to ‘turn around’ in the payments by results scheme

Department for Communities and Local Government

The Programme

- Our objective is to turn around the lives of 120,000 families

“... I will make sure that we clear away the red tape and the bureaucratic wrangling, and put rocket boosters under this programme...with a clear ambition that within the lifetime of this Parliament we will turn around the lives of the 120,000 most troubled families in the country”.

Prime Minister, 2011

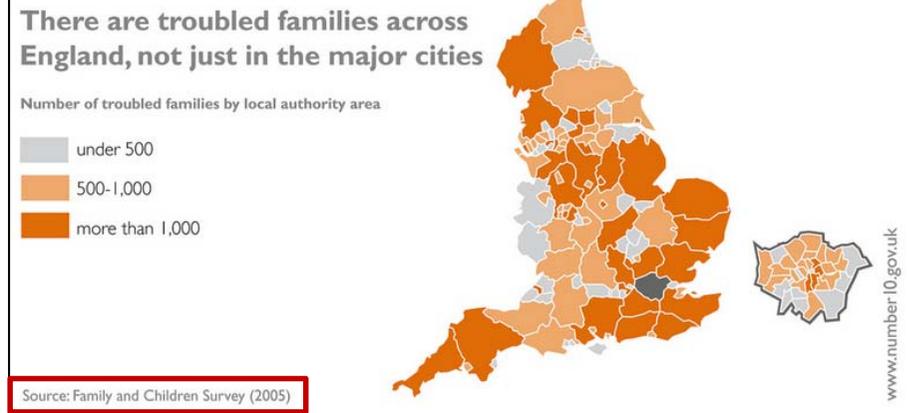
- £448million and three years to achieve this.
 - Payment by results scheme +
 - National Network of Troubled Families Coordinators +
 - Independent Evaluation +
 - 150 Jobcentre Plus Secondees

Troubled Family Estimates Explanatory Note

The figures presented in the table represent indicative numbers of troubled families per Local Authority, based on previous Family and Children Survey data concerning the proportion of troubled families that face multiple problems.

That survey estimated that in England there are likely to be around 120,000 families facing multiple problems. Estimates for how those families are likely to be distributed across local authorities are calculated using population estimates and indices of deprivation and child well-being.

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/www.communities.gov.uk/documents/newsroom/pdf/2053538.pdf>



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/number10gov/sets/72157628427403485>

David Cameron's £448m for scumbag families



DAVID Cameron has pledged £448million to help 120,000 problem British families.

Revealed: The £9billion cost of Britain's 120,000 problem families blighted by jobless parents and truanting children

MailOnline

- Two-thirds spent protecting children and tackling crime
- Over half of kids with jailed dads will end up convicted
- Research comes as David Cameron prepares to announce new sanctions against unruly families

So is looking at the 120,000 number still relevant?

- The **political/policy/media rhetoric** associated with the number makes a direct link between troubled families (poverty) & trouble families (crime/anti-social behaviour)
- Despite **no measure** of crime/anti-social behaviour being used in the (initial) definition of a troubled family

Why we need to turn troubled families around

24% of adult prisoners have been in care...



Source: SPCR survey (2005/06) quoted in Ministry of Justice Compendium of re-offending statistics and analysis, *Statistics Bulletin* (2010)

...as have around **55%** of 15–18-year-old female young offenders



Source: HMIP/Youth Justice Board, *Children and Young People in Custody 2010–11: An analysis of the experiences of 15–18-year-olds in prison* (2011)

www.number10.gov.uk

'Troubled family' (SETF, 2007 / DCLG, 2011)

- SETF definition, adopted by DCLG
- 5 or more of the following disadvantages:
 1. No parent in the family is in **work**
 2. Family lives in poor-quality or overcrowded **housing**
 3. No parent has any **qualifications**
 4. Mother has **mental health** problems
 5. At least one parent has a long-standing limiting **illness, disability or infirmity**
 6. Family has **low income**
 7. Family cannot **afford** a number of food and clothing items

Data

Exploring ‘troubled’ and ‘trouble’ families - Definitions¹

‘Troubled family’ (SETF,2007 / DCLG,2011)

- SETF definition, adopted by DCLG
- 5 or more of the following disadvantages:
 1. No parent in the family is in **work**
 2. Family lives in poor-quality or overcrowded **housing**
 3. No parent has any **qualifications**
 4. Mother has **mental health** problems
 5. At least one parent has a long-standing limiting **illness, disability or infirmity**
 6. Family has **low income**
 7. Family cannot **afford** a number of food and clothing items

‘Trouble family’ (DCLG,2012)

- DCLG’s definition in payment-by-results
- 3 or more of the following criteria
 1. Are involved in youth **crime or ASB**
 2. Have children who are regularly **truanting** or not in school
 3. Have an adult on out of work **benefits**
 4. Cause **high costs** to the public purse e.g. child on Child Protection Plan, families subject to frequent police call-outs or arrests, families with health problems, etc.

There are
120,000 of these

How many of
these are there?

How many ‘troubled
families’ are ‘trouble
families’ (and vice-versa)?

¹ Note that there have been other definitions used as the programme has evolved over the years

Datasets we have reviewed

Families and Children Study (1999-2008)

Troubled families	In the data?
No parent in the family is in work	Yes
Poor-quality or overcrowded housing	Yes
No parent has any qualifications	Yes
Mother has mental health problems	Yes
At least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity	Yes
Family has low income	Yes
Family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items	Yes
Trouble families	In the data?
Youth crime or ASB	Yes
Children regularly truanting or not in school	Yes
Adult on out of work benefits	Yes
Cause high cost to the public purse	Yes

Understanding Society survey (2009/10-2014/15)

Troubled families	In the data?
No parent in the family is in work	Yes
Poor-quality or overcrowded housing	Yes
No parent has any qualifications	Yes
Mother has mental health problems	Yes
At least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity	Yes
Family has low income	Yes
Family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items	Yes
Trouble families	In the data?
Youth crime or ASB	Yes
Children regularly truanting or not in school	Yes
Adult on out of work benefits	Yes
Cause high cost to the public purse	No

Offending Crime and Justice Survey (2003-2006)

Troubled families	In the data?
No parent in the family is in work	HRP only
Poor-quality or overcrowded housing	Interviewer report
No parent has any qualifications	1 parent only
Mother has mental health problems	1 parent only
At least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity	1 parent only
Family has low income	Yes
Family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items	No
Trouble families	In the data?
Youth crime or ASB	Yes
Children regularly truanting or not in school	Yes
Adult on out of work benefits	HRP only
Cause high cost to the public purse	No

Crime Survey of England and Wales (2014)

Troubled families	In the data?
No parent in the family is in work	HRP only
Poor-quality or overcrowded housing	Interviewer report
No parent has any qualifications	1 parent only
Mother has mental health problems	1 parent only
At least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity	1 parent only
Family has low income	Yes
Family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items	No
Trouble families	In the data?
Youth crime or ASB	Yes
Children regularly truanting or not in school	Yes
Adult on out of work benefits	HRP only
Cause high cost to the public purse	No

The data: Families and Children Study (FACS)

- Panel survey of **British families** with dependent children (1999–2008)
- Information from approx. **7,000 families and 12,000 children** each year
- The mother (or main carer) answers most of the questions – and many of the questions relate to the ‘parent/parents/children = the **family**’
- Covers income, work, housing, health, education etc. (the indicators SETF used to identify multiply-disadvantaged families / **troubled families**)
- Also section on ‘child problems’, including whether child been in trouble with police, suspended or excluded from school, has problems with drinking/drugs etc. (indicators we will use to identify **trouble families** – ‘**youth crime**’, ‘**truanting**’)
- And ‘use of social services’ in relation to above problems, including health worker, social worker, education welfare officer, family counsellor etc. (indicators we will use to identify **trouble families** – ‘**high cost**’)
- Plus a self-completion questionnaire given to children 10-15yrs covering issues such as alcohol consumption, taking drugs, skipping school etc.
- This was the data used to estimate the number of families with multiple disadvantages (SETF, 2007), which became the 120,000 troubled families (DCLG, 2011) – so couldn’t the TFU have delved into the FACS data further?

Early findings

Initial analysis of FACS suggests the link between ‘troubled families’ and ‘trouble families’ isn’t particularly strong

Table 1. Behaviours of secondary school children according to number of disadvantages their family has

Number of disadvantages their family has	Behaviours of secondary school children	
	In trouble with the police ¹	Suspended or excluded from school ¹
None	1%	1%
1 or 2	3%	4%
3 or 4	5%	7%
5 or more (the ‘120,000 troubled families’)	10%	11%

Notes:

- ¹ As reported by the mother

- The data is from the Families and Children Survey ([DWP 1999-2008](#)), a large scale survey representative of families in private households in Britain. The data is collected from the child and the child’s mother – it is not official police or school data.

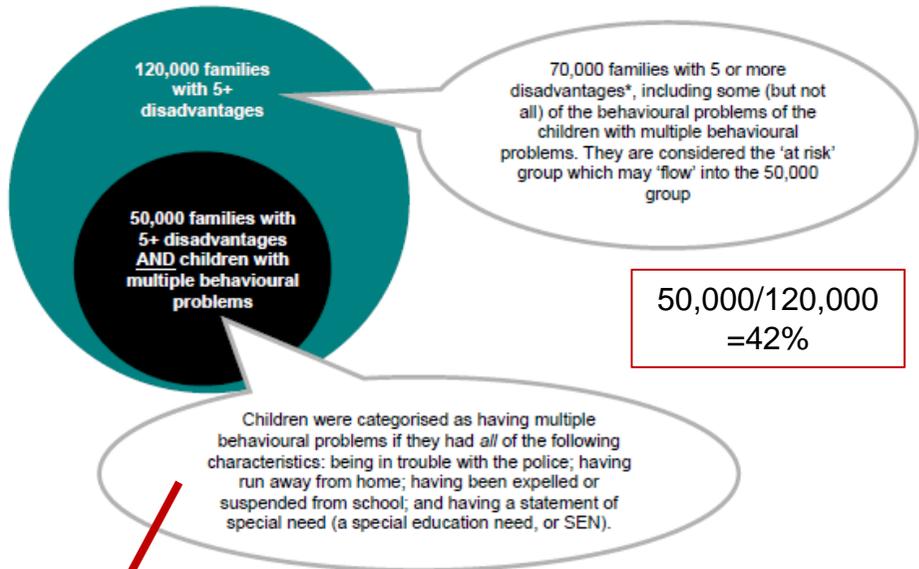
- Source: ([Cabinet Office, 2007b, p6](#) - this table is constructed from data in Chart 1).

- Although children from ‘troubled families’ are more likely than other children to have been in trouble with the police and to have been suspended/excluded from school, it is only a **minority** of these children that have done so, e.g. 90% of children from troubled families had not been in trouble with the police

Examining this analysis in the process...

The Families and Children Study was one source of information on troubled families' characteristics. Based on their analysis of the Families and Children Study, the Department for Education divided the 120,000 most troubled families into a sub-group of 50,000 families whose children had been in trouble with the police, run away from home, excluded from school and had special educational needs; and a separate sub-group of 70,000 families whose children often had some (but not all) of these problems and were considered 'at risk' of moving into the first group. This segmentation was used during some of this analysis when considering the incidence and cost implications of behavioural problems in the children of troubled families.

Annex B: Department for Education segmentation of the 120,000 troubled families



Source: The Department for Education analysis of the Families and Children Study 2006 & family intervention data

Notes:
* The Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Task Force conducted analysis on "families with multiple problems" that were defined as having five or more of the following characteristics: no parent in the family in work, the family lives in poor quality or overcrowded housing, no parent has a qualification, the mother has mental health problems, at least one parent has a longstanding limiting illness, disability or infirmity, the household income is below the poverty line, or the family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items.

It is also important to note that this was a static, rather than dynamic analysis of these families. Over time, it is likely that there would be flows from one cohort to the other, and in/out of both.

Child (aged 11-15): number of behaviour problems (police, suspended, runaway, SEN) * Number of disadvantages family has (max. 7) Crosstabulation

% within Number of disadvantages family has (max. 7)

		Number of disadvantages family has (max. 7)				Total
		None	1 or 2	3 or 4	5 or more	
Child (aged 11-15): number of behaviour problems (police, suspended, runaway, SEN)	0 problems	85.4%	74.4%	62.3%	63.9%	79.2%
	1 problem	12.5%	19.8%	25.4%	24.6%	16.3%
	2 problems	1.9%	3.9%	8.5%	6.6%	3.3%
	3 problems	0.2%	1.6%	3.5%	4.9%	1.1%
	4 problems		0.3%	0.4%		0.1%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

- According to the FACS data, there are 0% of children from troubled families with this combination of multiple problems
 - Quite a bit away from 42%

Louise Casey in The Guardian, 07/04/13



She dismissed controversy over the way the government had identified the 120,000 families - acknowledging that the number had come from Labour research which focused on finding disadvantaged families with multiple and complex needs, rather than families that caused problems. Her team retrospectively added new criteria: unemployment, truancy and anti-social behaviour.

"I think a lot is made of this, in retrospect, which needn't be," she said. "The most important thing when I got here in 2011 was if we take that 120,000 figure, give it to local authorities, give them the criteria behind troubled families, and they can populate it, which they have done, with real names, real addresses, real people - then I am getting on with the job.

"I could have said, let's get a university to spend the next three years studying, who is criminal, not in work, with kids not in school. I tell you what they will show - probably that a lot come from disadvantaged backgrounds."

Thank you

My contact details:

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Defining ‘400,000 troubled families’

- In 2015 the government announced a new expanded Troubled Families Programme, aimed at 400,000 troubled families
- To be eligible for the expanded programme, each family must have at least two of the following six problems
 1. Parents or children involved in crime or anti-social behaviour
 2. Children who have not been attending school regularly
 3. Children who need help: children of all ages, who need help, are identified as in need or are subject to a Child Protection Plan
 4. Adults out of work or at risk of financial exclusion or young people at risk of worklessness
 5. Families affected by domestic violence and abuse
 6. Parents or children with a range of health problems
- This research project focuses on the original 120,000 troubled families number/definition

OCJS data exploration – the link between ‘troubled’ families and ‘trouble’ families (parent behaviours)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRP out of work • Poor housing • Low income • Financial difficulties • Rented housing • Deprived area (IMD) Number of disadvantages Index	Couple fathers							Couple mothers						
	Any criminal offence in last year	Three or more criminal offences in last year	Any serious criminal offence in last year	Taken any illegal drug in the last year	Taken any A class drug in the last year	Arrested by the police within the last five years	Been to court accused of committing a crime within the last five years	Any criminal offence in last year	Three or more criminal offences in last year	Any serious criminal offence in last year	Taken any illegal drug in the last year	Taken any A class drug in the last year	Arrested by the police within the last five years	Been to court accused of committing a crime within the last five years
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
0	8.9	3.3	1.0	9.7	3.1	3.3	3.3	4.0	1.7	1.7	4.3	0.4	0.5	0.0
1	10.5	3.6	2.1	15.1	3.1	5.4	4.7	5.0	2.4	2.6	5.0	1.5	0.7	0.8
2	7.5	2.3	3.8	10.9	5.6	11.3	9.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.7	2.4	0.4	1.4
3	2.7	2.7	0.0	12.8	6.6	11.1	18.8	2.2	2.2	1.5	20.1	1.5	5.0	9.4
4	0.0	0.0	0.0	22.1	4.1	18.7	18.7	1.9	0.0	0.0	14.0	4.7	1.9	4.8

- Bold text indicates statistically significant difference in proportions
- Early indication of a link between ‘troubled’ and ‘trouble’
 - but again nowhere near a complete overlap