



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Not single spies but in battalions: a critical, sociological engagement with the idea of so-called 'Troubled Families'*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/106186/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Shildrick, T, MacDonald, R and Furlong, A (2016) Not single spies but in battalions: a critical, sociological engagement with the idea of so-called 'Troubled Families'. *Sociological Review*, 64 (4). pp. 821-836. ISSN 0038-0261

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12425>

---

© 2016, Wiley. This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: "Shildrick, T., MacDonald, R. and Furlong, A. (2016), Not single spies but in battalions: a critical, sociological engagement with the idea of so-called 'Troubled Families'. *The Sociological Review*, 64: 821–836. doi: 10.1111/1467-954X.12425" which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12425>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

‘Not single spies but in Battalions’: A critical, sociological engagement with the idea of so called troubled families

Tracy Shildrick, Robert MacDonald and Andy Furlong

---

Recent political and popular discourses in the UK have drawn upon a range of different concepts and powerful and easily recalled sound bites to describe groups who are disadvantaged and who are portrayed as undeserving. The labelling of disadvantaged groups in negative terms and in order to support punitive policies has a long history and not just in the UK. From the racialised ‘underclass’ discourses popular in the US to the recent discourse around ‘Troubled Families’ in the UK, there is a long tradition of labelling disadvantaged groups in such ways that they are alleged to be poor because of their dysfunctional cultures, anti-social behaviours and destructive family lifestyles. Drawing on interviews collected with different generations of deeply disadvantaged families we offer one of the first, empirical, sociological accounts of the problems and troubles that some families *can* face – over decades and over generations. We use this empirical case study by way of illustrating how these negative discourses successfully pave the way for punitive policy interventions and how they also have implications for how disadvantaged groups are treated and for personal wellbeing.

**Key words:** ‘Troubled Families’, Poverty, ‘Undeserving Poor’.

## **Introduction**

‘Troubled Families’<sup>i</sup> now occupy a prominent place in political and popular discourses around welfare, poverty and disadvantage, particularly in the UK. In this paper the discourse around ‘troubled families’ provides a contemporary example of the ways in which particular discourses about disadvantaged and marginalized groups can be employed to support particularly punitive understandings of, and responses to, poverty and social exclusion. The problems of ‘welfare dependency’, crime and anti-social behaviour, educational underachievement and even social justice have all been bound up in the UK government rhetoric about, and policy approaches towards, ‘Troubled Families’. According to Prime Minister David Cameron (2011), these are ‘the small number of families’ that 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’. ‘Troubled Families’ are said to be the locus of many of society’s ills and an enormous drain on public expenses (ibid). We argue that what has been lacking to date, in critical discussion, is a detailed, empirical, sociological investigation of the realities of the lives of disadvantaged families who face complex and multiple troubles.

The paper has four parts. Firstly, we review very briefly key literature and debate around the idea of ‘Troubled Families’ and sketch out some of the emergent critique of it. Secondly, we outline our research - conducted in very deprived neighbourhoods of Glasgow (Scotland) and Middlesbrough (England) - with different generations of twenty families who had experienced multiple, severe troubles. Thirdly, we identify three key, thematic findings that help us better to understand the sociological realities of families like these. Finally, in conclusion, we summarise our findings, state what they contribute to this debate and reflect on the likely fortunes of so-called ‘Troubled Families’ within a wider context of austerity.

### **A brief history of ‘Troubled Families’ – and the emergent critique**

‘Troubled Families’ have been implicated by politicians in what is claimed to be the *general* social and moral malaise of ‘Broken Britain’ (Travis and Stratton, 2011):

I’m committed to transforming the lives of families stuck in a cycle of unemployment, alcohol abuse and anti-social behaviour, where children are truants from school – troubled families who cause such negativity

within their communities and who drain resources from our councils (David Cameron, Prime Minister, 2012).

The moment some children are born their life chances are simply written off. From day one their lives are defined by the problems that surround them. Drugs. Alcohol. Crime. Mental illness. Unemployment. They grow up in chaos and their own lives are chaotic (Eric Pickles, Minister for Communities and Local Government, 2011).

The propensity to blame those experiencing poverty for their own predicament has a long history but it is a trend that has developed with renewed vigour over the recent Coalition and current Conservative political administrations in the UK (Pantazis 2016; Pemberton *et al* 2016). Internationally there is a long history of negative discourses being employed to facilitate punitive and discriminatory policies towards particular groups. For example, in the United States, aspects of the 'underclass' discourse took on a particularly racist quality in order to bolster support for policies that demonised and discriminated against black families and young black people in particular (Glazer and Moynihan 1965). The 'troubled families' discourse provides a contemporary example of similar sorts of processes occurring in contemporary UK social policy and practice.

The UK Coalition government drew heavily in it's already well established rhetoric around 'broken Britain' to push forward on it's 'Troubled Families' agenda after the riots that took place in London and other cities in 2011. 'Troubled Families' are defined by government<sup>ii</sup> as those who: are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour; have children not in school; have an adult claiming out of work benefits; cause high costs to the public purse (DCLG, 2012: 3)<sup>iii</sup>. Employment and employability is largely played down in these narratives. A significant document in understanding the government's 'Troubled Families' agenda is *Listening to Troubled Families* (2012). This report was authored by Louise Casey, who was appointed to direct the 'Troubled Families' programme after the 2011 riots and was well known for her outspoken approach. The report was based on conversations Casey conducted with sixteen so-called 'troubled families' identified by six local authorities in England. Casey summarised her key findings:

What came from these families' stories were that they had entrenched, long-term cycles of suffering problems and causing problems...The most striking common theme that families described was the history of sexual and physical abuse, often going back generations; the involvement of

the care system in the lives of both parents and their children, parents having children very young, those parents being involved in violent relationships and the children going on to have behavioural problems, leading to exclusion from school anti-social behaviour and crime (Casey, 2012: 1).

English local authorities were invited to work with such families (on a payment by results basis), with the aim of 'turning them around' by 2015 (i.e. by the General Election of that year). Families are assigned a key worker who is encouraged to 'gets to grips' with the family's problems in a hands-on way (e.g. by making sure the house is clean and meals are cooked). A family is deemed to have been 'turned around' - and the intervention successful - if one of the key initial criteria has been met (e.g. if a child is now attending school regularly or if anti-social behaviour has declined). By 2015, the Prime Minister praised the success of the Troubled Families Programme (TFP), claiming that 'the programme had succeeded in turning around 99% of the actual number of families targeted', i.e. 116,654 families (DCLG, 2015). Alongside this, the government announced a 'massive expansion' of the TFP 'to extend intensive help to [an additional] 400,000 high risk families' (HM Treasury, 2015). Official statistics show that the TFP appears to have been most successful in meeting targets for reducing truancy and anti-social behaviour (compared with moving people into lasting employment) (DCLG, 2015).

We can identify three broad lines of criticism of this 'Troubled Families' agenda. Firstly, critics have pointed to the strong similarities between accounts of 'Troubled Families' and earlier social problem groups. Hence it has been suggested that the 'Troubled Families' is simply the most recent in a long line of labels that seek to demonise, control and punish the so-called 'undeserving poor' (Welshman, 2013, 2015). Bob Holman (1994: 143) has pointed out that:

With almost boring repetitiveness vehement efforts have been exercised to impose a cleavage among the poor: those who are poor due to socio-economic and demographic factors outside their control and those who are poor because of their own inadequate, deviant behaviour. It has been a common theme that this latter group of recalcitrant and wayward, pathological individuals and families constitutes a destabilising force.

Welshman's history of the underclass idea (2013: 2), shows how 'it has been successively re-invented over the past 132 years in Britain and the US', through at least nine different versions. He concludes that 'the social residuum of the

1880s is the troubled family of the present day' (2013: 14). More specifically, Lambert (2015) has deepened this historical analysis by looking at the strong similarities (and the fewer dissimilarities) between attempts to identify 'problem families' in the 1940s and '50s and the current approach to 'Troubled Families'.

Secondly, and related, several commentators have done valuable work in locating the ideological nature of the 'Troubled Families' agenda, arguing that it stigmatises 'the poor' and provides moral justification for government welfare 'reforms' (e.g. Jensen 2012; Dermott, 2012; Allen and Taylor, 2012; De Benedictis, 2012; Barnes and Power, 2012; Tyler 2013). Certainly, many of the official pronouncements about this issue have not been shy of laying blame at the door of people in poverty. For instance, Eric Pickles, the Minister for Communities, has declared 'we have sometimes run away from categorising, stigmatising, laying blame. We need a less understanding approach' (Chorley, 2012). Thus, the 'Troubled Families' agenda is seen as providing an overly individualised view of the troubles that families experience, one which forefronts the alleged dysfunctions of families.

Whilst there are some similarities between the pronouncements of Louise Casey about 'Troubled Families' and our own research findings, a key difference is about the very limited extent to which Casey's report makes mention of the wider social context. Casey's report is at pains to document the variety of troubles that the families she spoke to faced and posed; chapter headings span from 'intergenerational transmission', through 'large families', 'dysfunctional relationships', 'abuse', 'violence', 'drugs and alcohol' and so on. Notable by their absence, from chapter headings - or even as words used in the report - are 'poverty', 'unemployment' and the limited opportunities for decent work. Crossley has argued that:

'Common-sense' pervades the 'Troubled Families' discourse and widespread support for the concept from across the political spectrum ensures that alternative or competing arguments are easily crowded out or kept off the political agenda (2015: 11)

Thirdly, critics - Ruth Levitas (2012) in particular - have documented some of the conceptual and methodological problems that lie behind government assumptions and claims in respect of 'Troubled Families'. She argues that the government 'misrepresents the research background' enabling it to 'invent' a 'small group of problem families' and to conflate 'families that experience

multiple disadvantage with families that cause trouble' (ibid: 12). Not only does she question the veracity of the figure (or 'factoid', as she calls it) of 120,000 'Troubled Families', she says that that 'attributed costings [of the 'Troubled Families' to the exchequer] are obscure and certainly open to question' (ibid: 12)<sup>iv</sup>. Indeed, Morris has argued that although the profile of families with multiple and complex needs has certainly been raised in the policy arena, 'the voices of the families are largely absent' (2012: 2). In developing her critique of the 'Troubled Families' agenda, Ruth Levitas commented, almost in passing, that 'doubtless families with backgrounds and circumstances as difficult as [this] exist' but 'there might be quite other ways of telling their stories' (2012). This, in a nutshell, is the aim of the paper. We believe there is substantial sociological work still to be done in properly understanding so-called 'Troubled Families'. These are families that are much talked about but rarely listened to and, we suggest, the nature of the research material we have gathered allows for one of the first empirical accounts of the way that multiple and complex troubles unfold in the lives of impoverished and heavily disadvantaged families.

### **Researching 'Troubled Families'.**

Our study was never designed to interview 'Troubled Families'. We were commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) to investigate a different contemporary policy idea: that of 'cultures of worklessness'. This is the popular idea that the values, attitudes and practices that encourage 'welfare dependency' and discourage employment – are passed down the generations, from parents to children, and that this helps explain the concentrations of worklessness that can be found in some parts of the UK. We also aimed to test a particular, strong version of this thesis; that there are families in the UK where 'no-one in three generations has ever worked'. In doing so we interviewed families who were often had a long history of deep troubles of various sorts that often rippled across generations. However, the families we spoke to objectively bore many similarities with the sorts of families described in the broader political, policy and popular discourse around 'Troubled Families'<sup>v</sup>.

We used a critical case study method, selecting white, working-class neighbourhoods with relatively stable populations and high rates of worklessness and social deprivation in two localities – Glasgow and Middlesbrough - that had experienced long-term economic decline. The varied strategies we used - to find 20 families (ten in each locality) where at least one family member in each generation had never been in employment – and the problems we faced are discussed in detail elsewhere (Authors removed for blind peer review). These methods, and indeed the results of the study, need not overly concern us here apart from saying that we were unable to locate any family where ‘three generations had never worked’ or any evidence of a ‘cultures of worklessness’ that might help explain the situation of these families (Authors deleted for peer review).

In failing to find ‘three generation never worked families’ we necessarily and progressively relaxed our sample recruitment criteria. The achieved sample was as follows. Twenty families from Glasgow and Middlesbrough participated in the research. 47 people were interviewed; 28 women and 19 men. We interviewed at least two members of each family, from different generations; typically, a long-term workless parent and his or her working-age, but unemployed son or daughter. Participants reported claiming a range of ‘out of work benefits’<sup>vi</sup>, including Job Seeker’s Allowance (JSA), Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Income Support (IS), Employment Support Allowance (ESA), Carer’s Allowance (CA) and Incapacity Benefit (IB). Nine interviewees, all but one in the younger generation, reported receiving no benefits or other income.

Research ethics were approved by Teesside University, following British Sociological Association guidelines. A key imperative was to preserve participants’ anonymity by using pseudonyms. Because these families were *unusual* rather than *usual* and they sometimes reported things which might threaten their anonymity we occasionally also had to alter minor biographical details. Interviews were normally conducted one-to-one, semi-structured, audio-recorded, lengthy (up to four hours in some instances) and usually conducted in people’s homes. Complicated family trees and relationships made it difficult to identify potential interviewees and some refused to participate. What some might call the ‘chaotic lives’ of some participants also meant that fieldwork was time-consuming and at times very difficult and distressing. To cover their expenses and encourage participation interviewees received £20. This proved to be one motivation for participation, but most said that they simply wanted to help us with the study and to try and have some influence over the way that issues that affected them were being dealt with by government. Analysis proceeded from the verbatim transcription of interviews

and construction of 'life history grids' for each participant. Case studies of each family were produced, presenting the relevant material under thematic codes for each family member meaning that we could see the extent to which experiences were shared across different generations of the same family. Case studies were read and debated by all the research team and used to generate the research findings.

### **What did we learn about so-called 'Troubled Families'?**

In the following section we present an extended discussion, organised around three key thematic findings and arguments.

#### ***The multiplicity, severity and complexity of the troubles families faced***

Ruth Levitas (2012) acknowledges that 'doubtless families with backgrounds and circumstances as difficult as Casey documents exist'. Our first point is perhaps the most obvious one. Families that have experienced (and caused for others) severe and multiple troubles *do* exist; despite criticisms that might imply this, they are not an ideological figment manufactured to justify welfare cuts (even if their statistical preponderance is often exaggerated and used to that end).

For the families we spoke to the troubles and problems they reported included: 'failed' schooling (pre - and post 16) and leaving school, usually at minimum age, with low (or no) educational qualifications; long-term worklessness; anti-social behaviour, offending and imprisonment; problematic drug and alcohol use (and addiction); violence (including domestic violence); physical, sexual and/ or emotional abuse; victimisation and the stress of living in highly deprived neighbourhoods; mental and physical ill-health; and enduring poverty and material deprivation. All of the twenty families reported several of these problems. A few reported them all. Unsurprisingly, it was the middle-generation of these families – parents who had been recruited because of their very long-term worklessness - that tended to talk about the most severe problems. Dean (2003: 450) also studied people with multiple and complex problems and like our interviewees, the participants in his research also led 'terrifyingly eventful lives'. There is some superficial resemblance between the government's description of 'Troubled Families' and our own. Louise Casey reported that the families she 'listened to' faced severe and multiple difficulties and that these were 'long-term', 'entrenched', 'complex' and 'cumulative' in their effects (Casey 2012). We have used the same

adjectives in describing the biographies of the families we interviewed (Authors x2 deleted for peer review). Unlike Casey, however, we did not find that 'abuse' was 'the most striking common theme' (2012) across the lives of the families we spoke to, although we did find that in a number of cases histories of drug and alcohol addiction (sometimes from a young age) and frequent experiences of prison often provided the backdrop to their complex, troubled lives.

What became very clear, even early on in the fieldwork, was the sheer *preponderance* of problems these families faced and the *complexity* of their interrelation. Paraphrasing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act IV, Scene 5), troubles came not as 'single spies but in battalions'. In our earlier studies, families had proved largely resilient when faced with one or two problems, drawing upon family and neighbourhood social capital to maintain a fragile footing in the labour market (Authors removed for peer review purposes). The families in the study reported here were often swamped by the multiplicity of deep troubles they faced. The seemingly relentless waves of problems destabilised their lives, sapped well-being, exhausted social capital and overwhelmed their ability to engage with employment. It is important to note that the troubles our families experienced very often had a magnifying and compounding effect. Problems that might have been coped with in isolation became, at times, insurmountable when they arrived on the back of others. Thus, for our families multiple and severe problems over the long-term had distanced them from the labour market. Other priorities presented as more urgent. As one middle-aged mother in Glasgow exclaimed at the end of her interview: 'how can you work with a life like mine?'

*Disentangling* the complexities of these multiple, engulfing problems was an enormous challenge for us as researchers, even with the benefit of lengthy, open interviews and a concerted effort to recapitulate and make sense of life stories. Very many examples could be offered from the research but we select one here, from the story told us by Amanda Duncan (aged 50) from Middlesbrough. Her account demonstrates the long-range effects of early hardships – abuse, specifically - and the complicated interaction of later troubles. A snap-shot view, *frozen in the present*, might identify her problems with alcohol, *or* her depression, *or* her constant shifts of address, *or* the stress of living in a difficult neighbourhood, *or* her complicated and strained family relationships, *or* the way she has been victimised by men. It is difficult to 'see' all of these problems, at once – and almost impossible to see how they have become intertwined. Amanda herself said, in referring to why so many social welfare agencies had failed to help her, 'they didn't see the complexity behind

what they screened'<sup>vii</sup>. Even with the advantage of our detailed, biographical approach we make no claim to the definitive account of Amanda's complex story.

As Amanda's case shows it is not necessarily the case that problem A led to problem B and then to problem C. It felt more like that A and B and C often came simultaneously or in quick succession and were piled on top of each other. One problem seemed to quickly follow another and attempts to resolve problems could often lead to other problems. For example, house moves to escape difficult or violent relationships could help to alleviate one problem, but then simultaneously produced others (financial costs, children moving schools etc.) Sometimes problems in childhood pave the way for further troubles in later life. So, for Amanda, childhood problems of parental abuse (at least, emotional and physical) seemed to initiate a chain of situations and outcomes, each of which then added further layers of disadvantage and trauma: problems at school and leaving home and school with no qualifications, and then low quality jobs; seeking out of men to provide security and affection – and this becoming a string of relationships that were all violent – which spurred the search for new partners for protection; early motherhood in an insecure, abusive relationship and this pattern repeating down the years in new partnerships; her inability to properly care for her children and repeating the physical abuse she herself had experienced as a child; successive changes of address to escape violent, previous partners, leading to social isolation and limits to her potential to make friendships that might give social capital. The pressures of living in psychologically hostile, high-crime environments added to her 'ill-being' (including witnessing assaults and a murder); 'problematic use' of alcohol to seek solace from her troubles, and her long-term depression, but this fuelling her violent actions towards her children; this, in turn, deepening her depression and sparking 'mental breakdown'; the demands and traumas of motherhood, and worsening mental health, limiting her ability to engage with further education and the labour market; these problems quashing the possibilities of finding a personal route away from poverty and consigning her to reliance on benefits in the long-term; and so on and so on.

So, although in Amanda's case, childhood abuse seemed a critical factor in setting the course of her life it was the building and multiple, interwoven consequences of this for her that *then*, turn by turn, shaped the nature of her social exclusion. This was the pattern for our middle generation interviewees: a complex web of multiple hardship and traumas.

### ***Not 'repeating the cycle': conventional hopes albeit in difficult circumstances***

The idea that negative values and behaviours are *socially learned* in dysfunctional families sits behind a long roll-call of theories that, over centuries, have sought to describe and explain poverty as culturally determined and passed through families (Welshman, 2012). This same idea is key to discourse and policy responses towards 'Troubled Families'. Thus, it is argued that social disadvantage becomes *culturally* entrenched and passed down the generations. A clear finding from our research was that participants - across generations and genders - expressed conventional attitudes to work and welfare (even though they generally struggled to realise them). Interviewees identified the positive social psychological benefits to working that have been widely reported in other research, even though their time in employment had been very limited (e.g. Jahoda, 1982; authors removed for peer review). Research about 'Family Intervention Projects' (the precursor to the Troubled Families programme) similarly showed that most participants retained conventional norms and values in tune with the communities in which they lived (Nixon et al, 2008). That parents hoped that their children might do better than them is a normal aspiration – and one that was evident in our study. Nevertheless, the opposite is implied, and sometimes claimed explicitly, in respect of 'troubled families'. Here Louise Casey's *Listening to Troubled Families* report (2012) seems out of kilter with other evidence. Casey says that parents in these families have 'low aspirations for themselves and their kids' and fail to 'connect their own problems... with the problems and behaviour of their children' (2012: 2). There is also a methodological problem here with her report. Although called *Listening to Troubled Families*, it would appear (methodological details are unclear) that Casey interviewed only one member of each of these sixteen families (in virtually all cases, the mother). This limits Casey's ability to see processes of intergenerational change and resistance to cultural inheritance. Children and young people are not given a voice, directly, in Casey's report<sup>viii</sup>.

*Unanimously*, across all or our interviews with the middle-generation parents, the hope was expressed that their children did not end up with the same long-term worklessness and same 'miserable existence' as them, to borrow one man's phrase. Deep in poverty and long out of the labour market, these parents possessed little of the social, cultural and financial capital that is known to be valuable in helping family members into jobs (Lindsey, 2010). Yet they tried their best to help their children; accompanying them to job interviews or ensuring younger children had newspaper rounds (so as to learn the value of earning money) were examples.

Another clear finding from our research was that young people emphasised their desire *not* to repeat the sort of troubled and impoverished lives lived by their parents. As with other studies of young adults growing up in socially disadvantaged circumstances (Authors removed for peer review purposes; Henderson et al, 2007), aspirations and goals were solidly conventional. Indeed, the *very* difficult life stories of their parents and ensuing family traumas and hardships seemed to energise an even stronger aspiration to be 'normal' or 'ordinary' amongst these young people. This is well expressed by Kerry White (31, Glasgow). She had grown up in difficult circumstances (her mother was a heroin user and Kerry had lived in care for long periods of her childhood). When she was 18, Kerry did voluntary work in a nursing home. She described how she felt:

I remember having my tunic on and going down Parkhill and the older ones, that seen my mum as a junkie [injecting drug user], seen me as a wee hairy [a derogatory term for a young, working-class woman], seen us all as kind of riff-raff, they used to go 'Oh! Are you working?' They would look at me, shocked, because I had a work uniform on. And it made me all the more determined. I thought 'everybody's thinking I'm just going to be the next wee drug addict growing up', and it's kind of made me stronger, the more people react like that to me.

Getting a job, settling down 'somewhere quiet' (often a little distance away from the immediate neighbourhoods), and escaping the material hardship and boredom of living on benefits were all commonly expressed ambitions amongst the younger interviewees.

This emotional rejection of the unhappiness of a family inheritance was no more evident than in the interview with Diane Duncan (23, Middlesbrough). Diane was brought up by Amanda (50) for periods of her early childhood before she was taken into care. As noted above, Amanda told a gruelling life

story in which childhood abuse transmuted into later abusive relationships (and children) with a series of violent men. Amanda had suffered serious mental health difficulties and alcohol addiction, had been physically abusive towards her own children and had rarely worked since she was a young woman. All her children had been taken in care. (Her story deserves more than those lines, but we do not have the space to tell it here). Amanda and Diane had recently re-established contact. Diane was 16, and still in local authority care, when she had her first child, Callum. Callum was deemed 'at risk' and a series of social services interventions were put in place. Eventually one of Diane's elder sisters initiated court proceedings to formally adopt Callum, which Diane contested - and won. Diane explicitly and flatly denied the idea that her difficult family background – and her own troubled childhood – determined the future for her and Callum:

I proved her wrong and I proved everyone else wrong...I was being labelled. Just because I'd been in care doesn't mean that what had happened to me, doesn't mean I'm going to do the same thing. Just because my Mum used to batter me doesn't mean I'm going to batter my kids.... I think it is true sometimes... but maybe [other] people, they wouldn't do it because it's been done to them. *They know how it feels to be left out and abused by people - so they wouldn't do it.* They'd make the child's life different, to make them feel better and have a happy childhood and not to have the same as them. Like, they wouldn't do it, well, I personally wouldn't do it.

Thus, her interview was one which *actively resisted* the central theoretical tenet of the 'Troubled Families' programme, that the problems of troubled families are predetermined to roll down the generations: 'he won't end up in care and he won't end up having a kid at sixteen...I want it to change', she said. Like others, this resistance, this search for something better than they had known, was often hooked into a belief that steady employment might provide a route to a happier, more secure way of life: 'Hopefully when I get a job, I'll keep my job, and I'll show him... you get nice things from working. People have maybe got a bit more respect with you. Not just wanting to sit in a council house doing nowt with my life'.

In sum, there was no evidence of these families passing on a 'culture of worklessness' and considerable evidence of aspirations to *not* repeat family troubles.

### ***Misrepresenting 'the poor': the atypicality of 'troubled families'***

Here our critique comes closer to existing sociological discussion, in which a core complaint has been that 'the troubled families' agenda' misrepresents 'the poor'<sup>ix</sup>. Crossley (2013, 2016) has described well the processes of moral panic at play as well as the misuse of statistics in narratives and policy developments around 'Troubled Families'. Part of this has been the ratcheting up of the numbers said to fall into this category (i.e. from 120,000 originally to 400,000 families 'at risk') (Crossley 2016). One of the clear dangers is that families in poverty become synonymous with 'Troubled Families'. There are (at least) two problems here. The first is the situation and difficulties of the majority are overlooked in the moral panic and policy clamour about a very small minority of families. In England the group of families in poverty extends massively beyond even the 400,000 families said to be at risk of becoming 'Troubled Families'. According to the government's official headline measure of poverty (i.e. living under 60% median income, before housing costs) in 2012 17 per cent of children – over one in six or 2.3 million - were living in families in poverty with figures set to rise significantly under current policy measures (IFS 2015). If the policy response to poverty becomes fixated with 'troubled families' what help can the invisible majority expect?

A second issue is that the problems and traumas associated with 'Troubled Families' are taken to similarly affect all those on low incomes. Discursively, 'poor families' become 'families with troubles' which become 'troublesome families' (Levitas, 2013). Stigma spreads and vindictive attitudes to the poor multiply (Levitas, 2013). A coalition of churches has also suggested that 'the reputations of society's most disadvantaged families became collateral damage in the rush to defend a new policy' (Baptist Union of Great Britain et al, 2012: 4). Our numerous research projects during the 1990s and 2000s in deprived areas of Middlesbrough allow us some perspective on the particularities of our most recent one about 'cultures of worklessness', conducted in Glasgow and Middlesbrough. The families in this study had differences to those we have come across previously. The multiplicity of their troubles, the severity and lasting hardship of their lives, and their resultant *distance from even low-grade employment* made them stand out from the families we have come across previously. Thus, these families were *not* typical of other families living in poverty, locally or more widely. This explains why it was extremely difficult to find and recruit the families that we did; their detachment from the labour market was unusual. We approached (but then turned down) literally hundreds of people who were engaged in 'the low-pay, no-pay cycle', i.e. churning between periods in and out of employment (Thompson 2015). The sporadic, insecure but repeated experience of employment was much more common in these neighbourhoods than the very long-term worklessness of the

families to whom we talked. So, in searching for ‘generations of families where no-one has ever worked’ and then the very long-term workless, we by-passed the more common experiences of poverty and worklessness in these neighbourhoods, drilling down to atypical and very troubled families. In discussing their situations, in this paper, we are discussing families who are neither typical of the local working-class nor of these impoverished neighbourhoods.

## **Conclusion**

Our paper offers a different perspective on ‘Troubled Families’ to those that have preceded it. We acknowledge that a small number of extremely troubled families exist - at the same time as being aware of the risks of ‘othering’ families that live in poverty and disadvantage (Lister, 2004). Rarely have the direct accounts of families in such deep and troubled circumstances been included in critical discussions; this is one of the key contributions of our paper. Drawing on detailed, biographical interviews with very deprived families from very deprived locales we make three main arguments in relation to ‘Troubled Families’. Firstly, we suggest that historical and discourse-based critiques of the TFP need to be augmented with research that identifies and unravels the severe, complex, multiple and compounding problems that some families can experience. Such multi-troubled families do exist; they are not simply ideological constructs of government. That said, the propensity to take these cases as representative of the majority of people experiencing poverty – as has been the case in much of the policy and political discourse – must be resisted. The nature of our study meant the cases we encountered were unusual, not usual. Secondly, the ‘Troubled Families’ agenda appears to overstate the inevitability of families ‘repeating the cycle’ of troubles down the generations and underplays families’ attempts to retain conventional hopes and lifestyles under very pressured conditions. Finally, there is the danger that government attention to ‘Troubled Families’ diverts attention from more typical experiences of poverty and the more general experiences of families living in poverty.

The paper offers a contribution to debates around how particular narratives are utilised to demonise groups and individualise particular problems and populations. As Clarke and Newman have shown in respect of their work around austerity, there is clear political and ideological work being done here that focuses on supposed moral and behavioural deficits that ‘enables a profound denial of issues of socio-economic inequality and their effects (2012: 311). It is not just the denial of the structural causes of poverty and

disadvantage that are important here but also ways in which negative labelling of this sort can pave the way for punitive policies directed at those in disadvantaged circumstances. As Tyler has illustrated 'the torrent of 'underclass' appellations' that were brought into play after the riots in the UK in 2011 showed very clearly how 'political myths' are being utilised to garner 'public consent' for punitive policy development (2012). These narratives also impact on how those experiencing poverty are treated, leading to overly punitive and discriminatory practices (Pemberton 2016; Hastings 2009a, 2009b) and negative impacts on the wellbeing of the disadvantaged (Pemberton 2016; Kent 2016).

To conclude, we note how it is likely that the experiences of the families we have interviewed will have become even more pressured since we interviewed them. That was at a point when government 'welfare reforms', under the name of austerity, were only just being rolled out. The full effects of these were yet to be felt – even though indications were emerging in interviews of the stress, health-problems, attempted suicides and severe financial troubles associated with their implementation. Recent research has demonstrated that it is the most deprived locales and most disadvantaged people that have borne the brunt of austerity cuts and 'welfare reforms' (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013; O'Hara, 2014). In turn, these changes and cuts have been implicated in failures in the payments of benefits which in turn has fuelled the need for both debt-inducing, high cost credit from 'pay-day lenders' (Banks et al, 2013) and up to two-thirds of the demand for emergency food relief from food-banks (Perry, 2014). Indeed, research that draws on the same methodology originally used to estimate the number of 'Troubled Families' in the UK has concluded that the effects of government austerity programmes (i.e. tax and benefit changes and spending cuts) together with the on-going effects of the economic downturn, will lead to a 'substantial increase in the number of vulnerable families with children between 2010 and 2015' (Reed, 2012: 9). The report finds that such families are likely to be significantly poorer than they were in 2010 and public spending cuts will have hit them much harder than the population at large. Most worryingly, the report predicts that the number of families with children facing 'extreme vulnerability' is likely to double because of austerity. We can only conclude that the prospects for our already deeply troubled interviewees look very bleak indeed, as it does indeed seem that for those at the bottom troubles come not as single spies but in battalions.

## References

Allen K. and Taylor, Y. (2012) 'Placing Parenting, Locating Unrest: Failed Femininities' *Studies in the Maternal* 4 (2) 1-25

Banks, S., Brown, G., Flaherty, J., Herrington, T., and Waters, M. (2013) *Debt on Teesside: Pathways to Financial Inclusion*, Final Report, Durham University, [https://www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/researchprojects/debt\\_on\\_teesside/](https://www.dur.ac.uk/beacon/socialjustice/researchprojects/debt_on_teesside/)

Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church, the Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church (2013), *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty*, [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandliesaboutpoverty](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandliesaboutpoverty)

Barnes, C and Power, M. (2010) 'Internalising Discourses of Parenting Blame: Voices from the Field' *Studies in the Maternal* 4 (2)

BBC News 'England riots: Cameron to boost troubled-families plans' (15<sup>th</sup> August 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14527540>

Beatty, C. and Fothergill, S. (2013) *Hitting the poorest places hardest: the local and regional impact of welfare reform*, CRESC, Sheffield.

Cameron, D. (2012) quoted on 'Inside Government' website: *Troubled families: top 10 areas are on board as government is ready to go*, 28<sup>th</sup> March <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/troubled-families-top-10-areas-are-on-board-as-government-is-ready-to-go>

Cameron, D. (2011, 15<sup>th</sup> December) 'Troubled families speech', <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/troubled-families-speech>

Casey, L. (2012) *Listening to Troubled Families*, London: DCLG.

Chorley, M. (2012) 'Problem Families Told Stop Blaming Others', *Independent on Sunday*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Clarke, J. and Newman, J. (2012) 'The Alchemy of Austerity' *Critical Social Policy* Vol. 32, No. 3, pp 299 - 319

Crossley, S. (2015) 'Realising the (troubled) family', 'crafting the neoliberal state' *Families, Relationships and Societies* May

Crossley, S. (2016) 'The 'troubled families' numbers game' *Environment and Planning A* January 2016, 48, 4-6

DCLG (2012) *The Troubled Families programme: Financial framework for the Troubled Families programme's payment-by-results scheme for local authorities*,

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/11469/2117840.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/11469/2117840.pdf)

DCLG (2015) 'PM praises Troubled Families programme success', News Release, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-praises-troubled-families-programme-success>

Dean, H. (2003)

De Benedictis, S. (2012) 'Feral Parents: Austerity Parenting under Neoliberalism' *Studies in the Maternal* 4 (2)

Dermott, E. (2012) 'Poverty versus parenting: an emergent dichotomy' *Studies in the Maternal* 4 (2)

DWP (2013) *Households below average national income 1994/5-2011/12*.

London: DWP

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/206778/full\\_hbai13.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/206778/full_hbai13.pdf)

[Glazer, N. and Moynihan, D.P. \(1965\) \*Beyond the Melting pot\* California, California University Press](#)

Hastings, A. (2009a) 'Neighbourhood environmental services and neighbourhood "effects": exploring the role of urban services in intensifying neighbourhood problems', *Housing Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 503–24

Hastings, A. (2009b) 'Poor neighbourhoods and poor services: evidence on the

“rationing” of environmental service provision to deprived neighbourhoods’, *Urban Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 13, pp. 2907–27

Henderson *et al* (2007) *Inventing Adulthoods: A biographical approach to youth transitions* London, Sage

HM Government (2014) *An evidence review of the drivers of child poverty for families in poverty now and for poor children growing up to be poor adults*  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/285389/Cm\\_8781\\_Child\\_Poverty\\_Evidence\\_Review\\_Print.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285389/Cm_8781_Child_Poverty_Evidence_Review_Print.pdf)

HM Treasury (2015) ‘Massive expansion of Troubled Families programme announced’, News release, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/massive-expansion-of-troubled-families-programme-announced>

Holman, B. (1994) *Poverty and Poor Relief: Concepts and Reality* Aldershot: Avebury.

Jensen, T. (2012) ‘Tough love in tough times’ *Studies in the Maternal* 4 (2)

Jensen, T. and Tyler, I. (2015) ‘Benefit broods’: the cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare common sense’ *Critical Social Policy* 35 (4) 470 - 491

Jahoda, M. (1982) *Employment and Unemployment: A Social-Psychological Analysis* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Kent, G. (2016) ‘Shattering the silence: The power of Purposeful Storytelling in challenging social security policy discourses of ‘blame and shame’ in Northern Ireland *Critical Social Policy* Vol. 36 (1) pp124 -141

Lambert, M. (2015) ‘Bridge over troubled water’: what we don’t know about those 80,000 post-war ‘problem families’, *Getting with the programme: history and contemporary practice workshop*, Durham University.

Levitas, T. (2012a) *There may be ‘trouble’ ahead: what we know about those 120,000 ‘troubled families’*, Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK (PSE UK), working paper, 3, ESRC.

Levitas, R. (2012b) 'Still not listening', *Poverty and Social Exclusion Research Group*, <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/articles-families/still-not-listening>

Levitas, R. (2013) *Troubled families: misrepresenting poverty*, presentation to Institute of Local Governance, Durham University, 15<sup>th</sup> March.

Lister, R. (2004) *Poverty* London, Polity

Morris, K. (2012) 'Troubled families: vulnerable families' experiences of multiple service use' in *Child and Family Social Work*, 12, 2.

Nixon, J. et al (2006) *Interim Evaluation of Rehabilitation Projects for Families at Risk of Losing their Homes*. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: London.

O'Hara, M. (2014) *Austerity Bites* Bristol, Policy Press

Pemberton, S., Fahmy, E., Sutton, E. and Bell, K. (2016) 'Navigating the stigmatised identities of poverty in austere times: Resisting and responding to narratives of personal failure' *Critical Social Policy* Vol. 36 (1) pp 21 -37

Perry, J. (2014) *Emergency Use Only: Understanding and reducing the use of food bans in the UK*, London: Child Poverty Action Group, Oxfam GB, Church of England, Trussell Trust.

Pickles, E. (2011) Speech on 'Action on problem families', 17<sup>th</sup> October, 'Inside Government', <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/action-on-problem-families> - from RM

Reed, H. (2012) *In the eye of the storm: Britain's forgotten children and families*, a research report for Action for Children, the Children's Society and NSPCC, London.

Rutter, M. and Madge, N. (1976) *Cycles of Disadvantage* London, Heinemann

Thompson, S. (2015) *The low-pay, no-pay cycle* York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Travis, A., and Stratton, A. (2011) 'David Cameron's solution for broken Britain: tough love and tougher policing', *The Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/aug/15/david-cameron-broken-britain-policing>

Tyler, I. (2013) 'The riots of the underclass: stigmatisation, mediation and the government of poverty and disadvantage in the UK' *Sociological Research on Line* 18 (4)

Welshman, J. (2013) *Underclass: a history of the excluded since 1880*, London: Bloomsbury Press

Welshman, J. (2015) 'Introductory Comments', *'Getting with the programme: theory and sociological views workshop*, Lancaster University.

---

<sup>i</sup> We refer to 'Troubled Families' capitalised and in inverted commas so as to indicate the problematic nature of the term and concept.

<sup>ii</sup> Although one of our fieldwork sites was in Scotland, it should be noted that 'troubled families' is a term that largely emanates from English discourse leading to English specific policy responses.

<sup>iii</sup> According to the government guidance, families that meet the first three criteria 'should automatically be part of the programme', and local authorities are enabled to add further criteria at 'local discretion' (i.e. families should meet two of the three criteria but may also pose or face other problems for instance related to child protection, family ill-health or frequent police call-outs; DCLG, 2012).

<sup>iv</sup> Levitas' PSE research group sought clarification on exactly how the alleged £9 billion was derived, using a Freedom of Information request, but this did not lead to a satisfactory explanation (Levitas, 2013).

<sup>v</sup> On strict, operational definitions some of 'our' families would not be eligible for the TFP. For instance, it does not operate in Scotland (we drew half our sample from Glasgow). Not all of the families had school-aged children who truanted (several did). Nevertheless, the deep and multiple troubles of these families seem to mirror what is imagined by government.

<sup>vi</sup> 11 said they were in receipt of Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) as their 'main benefit'; eight, Disability Living Allowance (DLA); five, Income Support (IS); five, Employment Support Allowance (ESA); two, Carer's Allowance (CA); and two, Incapacity Benefit (IB).

<sup>vii</sup> Amanda reflected on how her own feelings of inadequacy had been reinforced by some of the agencies that had intervened in her life: 'it's like a production line and making people feel that they are not up to scratch. They need to stop putting fear into an already unsteady person'.

<sup>viii</sup> Also, although one can appreciate the challenge of contacting men/ fathers (given that many of these were female-headed lone parent families) we would stress the need to include them in the story if we really claim to be 'listening to troubled families'. Casey makes the point that is very difficult sometimes to make sense of the sort of complicated stories that members of 'Troubled Families' tell. Adding more voices makes it harder. From our own research experience, however, we would stress the necessity of taking into account the sometimes conflicting stories of a variety of family members, particularly of different generations.

---

<sup>ix</sup> Levitas (2013) makes a more particular point about the atypicality of the families Casey interviewed (2012). These tended to have very large numbers of children. Levitas comments that whilst it is true that very large families tend to be poorer, people in poverty do not tend to have larger families.