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

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*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.*

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The government recently launched its 'Troubled Families Programme'. This offers payments by results to Local Authorities in England for identifying and 'dealing with' families responsible for school absence, youth offending and anti-social behaviour. It claims that there are 120,000 such families but there is no evidence whatsoever for this claim. The figure of 120,000 is a very rough estimate of the number of families who were experiencing severe multiple deprivation in 2004. The slide from families with troubles to families who cause trouble is wholly illegitimate and is accompanied by punitive rhetoric towards some of the poorest families in Britain.

What is a troubled family?

The target group of the Troubled Families Programme is households which:

- are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour;
- have children not in school;
- have an adult on out-of-work benefits;
- cause high costs to the public purse.

As well as claiming that there are 120,000 such households, the Government has issued each Local Authority with the number of families they should look for as their share of this total. They also say that they cost the public purse £9 billion pounds a year or about £75,000 per family.

Rhetoric about this group is punitive and vindictive. In December 2011, David Cameron said:

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'. Whatever you call them, we've known for years that a relatively small number of families are the source of a large proportion of the problems in society. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations.

Just this week, Eric Pickles, Minister for Communities and Local Government, who is responsible for the Troubled Families Programme, said, 'Sometimes we have run away from categorising, stigmatising, laying blame'.

Where does the figure of 120,000 come from?

In 2007, the Labour Government's Social Exclusion Task Force re-analysed some data from a survey called the Families and Children Study carried out in 2004. They found that about 2 per cent of families in the sample suffered multiple deprivation. Specifically, they had five of the following seven characteristics:

- No parent in the family is in work;
- Family lives in overcrowded housing;

- No parent has any qualifications;
- Mother has mental health problems;
- At least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity;
- Family has low income (below 60 per cent of median income);
- Family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items.

Two per cent led to an estimate of 140,000 for Britain, later recalculated as 117,000 for England, and rounded up to 120,000. We need to remember that this was a survey. Even where the sample is a very good one, small numbers of this kind are quite unreliable, and statistically we would usually say 'plus or minus 3 per cent'. This means the figure could be anywhere up to 300,000. In the case of this survey, there are reasons to suppose that the poorest families are under-represented, so they may have been even higher. Coalition policies themselves have affected families with children so badly that the numbers of very poor families will be rising.

But the main point is that this study measured something completely different from the concerns of the Troubled Families Programme. There was no evidence whatsoever that children were missing school or engaged in anti-social behaviour or youth offending. Using multiple deprivation as a proxy for crime and anti-social behaviour implies that poor people are all potential or actual criminals.

How were the figures for Local Authorities produced?

The sample used in the original survey was far too small to generate local estimates. What government researchers did was to take the Index of Multiple Deprivation, which is an area-based aggregate level of overall deprivation and combine it with Child Well-being Index. Ranking local authorities on this basis enabled them to estimate the share of the overall total in each area. Although each local authority has been given a very specific figure, it is a complete fiction. It is a guessed-at share of a total for which there is no evidence.

Why is the Government doing this?

The most charitable explanation is that their research is statistically incompetent. There is other evidence to support this. For instance, Ian Duncan Smith seems to believe that if you increase benefits, the poverty line will go up. This is not true, but based on a common confusion between the median and the mean. The median household income is the point below (and above) which half of all household incomes fall. So if the poverty line is 60 per cent of the median, you can move everyone over it without the median moving at all. The mean or average is the total sum of all household incomes divided by the total number of all households. It is higher than the median because of the very high incomes of the rich, and this would be affected by increasing the incomes of the poorest.

The second reason is that explaining poverty and unemployment in terms of the behaviour of the poor – blaming the victims – means the government is not responsible for the rising levels of poverty and social distress flowing from their policies.

The third reason is that the figure of 120,000 families distracts attention from the extent of child poverty, which dropped substantially, if not far enough, under the Labour Governments. According to [official figures](#) released this week, in 20010/11 the number of children in poverty stood at up to 3.6 million children. The [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#) report that child poverty is now rising and will continue to do so as a result of Coalition policies. And guess what? The government is now trying to abolish or [change the measure](#) to disguise that fact.

More data and information on poverty and social exclusion in the UK is [available online](#).

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About the author

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