

The trouble with the Troubled Families Programme – repeating the failed attempts of the past

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The Troubled Families Programme is once again *in trouble in the news*. A [previous blog post](#) showed how the policy was rolled out without proper evaluation. Here, [Stephen Crossley](#) and [Michael Lambert](#) outline the historical precedents for this type of family intervention policy, and argue that by not learning from past mistakes, the current programme is doomed to repeat them.

Louise Casey, Director-General of the Troubled Families Programme from 2012-15, said in her 2012 report [Listening to Troubled Families](#) that:

This new programme of work with 120,000 troubled families is an opportunity to not repeat the failed attempts of the past but to get underneath the skin of the families, and of the services that are now going to be working with them.

Despite being a history graduate Casey's claim 'not to repeat the failed attempts of the past' has been shown by historians [John Welshman](#) and [Pat Starkey](#) to be flawed. The idea that some families pass on their supposed behavioural shortcomings across the generations is far from new. Neither is the idea that the state services engaged with these families are inadequate and need reforming. The 'suppressed' evaluation of the Programme by Ecorys leaked last week found that it had 'no discernible' effect on its self-stated criteria of unemployment, truancy or criminality. But clearly there are those who are [still not listening](#).

We can in fact go right back to evaluations of 'problem families' in the 1940s and 1950s to shed light on these continued 'failed attempts of the past.' In 1950 a government circular advised local authorities to appoint a designated 'problem families' officer to develop policies in their areas, much as the current Programme has appointed Troubled Families Coordinators. They were given powers to create registers of local 'problem families', hold meetings to prevent 'overlapping' of services and advised to identify families earlier for quick and cost-effective intervention.

A [1954 report](#) on the operation of this system in Manchester and Salford saw the problem in similar terms to Casey from her 2012 report:

Poverty, disease, broken homes, overcrowding, frequent pregnancies, unwanted children, ignorance, apathy, mental instability, alcoholism, and the rest, all appear among these families.

And it also found the state services and bureaucratic framework part of the problem:

We need to pick the people best able to help the families in troubled and leave them to get on with the job, unencumbered by more inter-departmental rivalries and more sub-divisions of social work.

The report saw teams of intensive, low-caseload workers in the best position to help families 'be "converted" to a new way of life', much like being 'turned around' today. Despite this support, the report remained sceptical of cost-

effectiveness, dwelt on the problems of defining ‘problem families and the stigmatisation for families labelled as ‘inferior citizens.’

Supporters of local policies – often ‘designated officers’ – touted anecdotal evidence of ‘[spectacular success in rehabilitating families](#)’. Particularly Family Service Units, which emerged to deal with problem families, pushed their ‘[friendship with a purpose](#)’ as a method of proven success in helping families to help themselves. Despite numerous impressionistic local evaluations and the expansion of problem family policies across the country, it was only with the ‘rediscovery of poverty’ in the mid-1960s [that they fell out of fashion](#). Unproven, anecdotal and written by advocates, ‘problem family’ evaluations are the clear precursor to the policy-based evidence which underpinned the ‘success’ of the Troubled Families Programme.

Local authorities are expected to run their local troubled families schemes using the ‘[family intervention](#)’ model. Casey, who was involved in the initial roll-out of Family Intervention Projects (FIP) across England under New Labour, [has stated that](#) ‘we know it [family intervention] works because we’ve already looked at studies that show that this works, basically, and also I’ve met countless families that have been turned around.’ This is certainly one reading of the research evidence surrounding the family intervention approach, yet when examining numerous government evaluations of FIPs – including one cited by Cameron at the launch of the Troubled Families Programme – a different picture can also emerge. David Gregg, in a [forensic examination](#) of some of the FIP evaluations, and which sounds remarkably relevant to the recent TFP news, noted

the discontinuities between the headline government claims for FIP success, the strong caveats and reservations of the three FIP evaluation teams over a decade and the marked weaknesses in evaluation methodology and database quality

Gregg, in arguing that FIPs are a ‘classic case of policy-based evidence’, also highlights that: claims for success were based on qualitative measures and very small family samples which the evaluators conceded were biased; no control groups were used and much of the evidence relied on the views of those involved with the project; and, no longitudinal studies had been commissioned despite three sets of researchers suggesting that such an approach would help to address questions about the longevity of any improvements in the longer term. The most [recent government evaluation](#) of FIPs, published back in December 2011 acknowledges that whilst FIPs appear to be associated with some improvements in families, in some areas such as anti-social behaviour (ASB), there is:

limited evidence that ASB FIPs generate better outcomes than other non-FIP interventions on family functioning or health issues, although FIPs do appear to be at least as effective as these alternatives

Other research also appears to cast doubt on the official view that family intervention style approaches work. There is a [paucity of evidence](#) that improved co-ordination of service delivery to families who are ‘high cost and high harm’, something that FIPs purport to achieve, improves outcomes for those families. And the [official evaluation](#) of the Family Nurse Partnership, a programme aimed at supporting young mothers, found that it was ‘no more effective than routinely available healthcare’ in improving any of the primary outcomes of the programme, which included reducing smoking in pregnancy, increasing birth weight and reducing rates of emergency attendance or hospital admission for any reason. [The researchers concluded](#) quite starkly that there was ‘little advantage’ to be gained from adding the partnership to existing service provision for young mothers.

So in direct contrast to Casey’s assertion that ‘we know family intervention works’, the weight of evidence surrounding ‘family intervention’ and similar approaches, over the longue durée, actually suggests that the approach doesn’t work. In failing to learn from the mistakes of the past, Casey and others involved in promoting the TFP, are

doomed to simply repeat them.

About the Authors

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