

120,000 troubled families in UK?

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The reliability of figures used as the basis for the Coalition's 'Troubled Families' program is questioned in new research published by academics at the University of Bristol.

The government claims that there are 120,000 'troubled families' in England, and has told local authorities how many live in each area. The program defines 'troubled families' as 'characterized by there being no adult in the family working, children not being in school, and family members being involved in crime and anti-social behavior'. They claim that that 'the Government identified a group of 120,000 troubled families whose lives are so chaotic they cost some £9 billion in the last year alone.'

Professor Ruth Levitas, an expert on poverty and social exclusion from the University's School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, examined the origins of the research on which these figures are based.

She shows that, the figure of 120,000 families derives from an analysis of 2004 survey data. This estimated that about two per cent of the families in the survey had five or more of 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.

We cannot even be sure that there are 120,000 families with these difficulties. Since it is a sample survey, the actual figures may be substantially lower or higher, possible as high as 300,000. But the main point is that the characteristics of these families are radically different from those targeted by the Troubled Families program. These are households experiencing multiple deprivation, with no evidence that they are involved in crime or anti-social behavior. There is no evidence that there are 120,000 families of the kind the government is targeting. The supposed 'share' for each local authority is derived from a completely different set of data. The figures given to local authorities, on the basis of which they are expected to design interventions with troubled families, are therefore entirely spurious.

Levitas argues that the language of 'troubled families' slides from families with troubles, through the idea that they are somehow dysfunctional as families, to families that cause trouble. This encourages public hostility to the poor as well as justifying punitive policies.

The research was undertaken as part of the background to a large ESRC-funded research project on Poverty and Social Exclusion in the United

Kingdom.

The full paper, '[There may be trouble ahead: what we know about those 120,000 troubled families](#)' can be accessed at the poverty.ac.uk website.

Professor Dave Gordon, Professor of Social Justice at the University, and the Principal Investigator on the ESRC project added: “In the term ‘troubled families’ it deliberately conflates families experiencing multiple disadvantage and families that cause trouble. The attributed costings are obscure and certainly open to question.”

Professor Ruth Levitas adds: “There are two possibilities. One is that the misrepresentation is deliberate. The other is that those responsible do not understand the research they are using. Either should raise alarm bells about the way policy is being made.”

More information: Department of Work and Pensions, Social Justice Strategy: Transforming Lives www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-justice-transforming-lives.pdf

Provided by University of Bristol

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