

Troubled Families: What is an ‘official statistic’?

Paul Spicker

What’s supposed to happen is laid out in the UK Statistics Authority’s Code of Practice.¹ Governments commission and produce statistics. The statistics should meet the requirements of “sound methods and assured quality” (Principle 4). To maintain the integrity of the process, the publication of statistics should include the details of how the statistics have been worked out. The expectation is that governments should

issue statistical reports separately from any other statement or comment about the figures and ensure that no statement or comment – based on prior knowledge – is issued to the press or published ahead of the publication of the statistics. (Principle 3)

Once the information is in the public domain, they can present it, interpret the data and formulate policy.

Here, by contrast, is what has happened with the statistics on ‘troubled families’. In December 2011, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced:

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’. ... We’ve always known that these families cost an extraordinary amount of money, but now we’ve come up the actual figures. Last year the state spent an estimated £9 billion on just 120,000 families – that is around £75,000 per family.²

¹ UK Statistics Authority, 2009, Code of Practice for Official Statistics, <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/>

² British Prime Minister’s Office, 2011, Troubled Families speech, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/troubled-families-speech/>

Those figures have been used by several government departments. The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) website announces:

Previous government research has highlighted that 2 per cent of families suffer significant multiple problems that in turn make them more likely to place demands on local services, such as health, social care and criminal justice. In England this equates to 120,000 families. Government data collected in October and November 2011 estimated that £9 billion is spent annually on these 120,000 most troubled families. That works out as an average of £75,000 per family per year. Of this, £8 billion is spent on reacting to the troubles of these families with just £1 billion being spent trying to turn around their lives in a targeted, positive way.³

A Home Office publication explains:

The Troubled Families Programme is responsible for turning around the lives of 120,000 troubled families before the next general election. A troubled family is one that has serious problems and causes serious problems, such as children not in school and the family causing crime and antisocial behaviour. Troubled families cost the taxpayer £9 billion a year, of which £8 billion is spent just on reacting to their needs and the problems they cause, such as constant police call-outs. £2.57 billion a year goes on crime and justice alone.⁴

The DWP's Social Justice Strategy refers to a group of 120,000 troubled families whose lives are so chaotic they cost the Government some £9 billion in the last year alone.⁵

Troubled families

The term 'troubled family' is a re-interpretation of figures from the 2007 Cabinet Office report *Families at risk*,⁶ which was concerned

³ Department for Communities and Local Government, *Communities and neighbourhoods: Troubled Families*, www.communities.gov.uk/communities/troubledfamilies

⁴ Home Office, *Have you got what it takes?* www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/police/pcc/working-with-others/tackling-troubled-families?view=Binary

⁵ Cm 8314, 2012, *Social justice: transforming lives*, (www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/social-justice-transforming-lives.pdf see preface and paras 7, 73, 181.)

with families which were are multiply disadvantaged. The definition is based on a series of indicators. A further explanatory note from the DCLG explains the derivation of the figures in a footnote. Families are 'troubled' if they show five of the following seven criteria for disadvantage:

1. having a low income,
2. no one in the family who is working
3. poor housing,
4. parents who have no qualifications,
5. where the mother has a mental health problem
6. one parent has a long-standing illness or disability, and
7. where the family is unable to afford basics, including food and clothes.⁷

This, Jonathan Portes has commented, is a long way from talking about "neighbours from hell".

How would you describe an unemployed single mother, with moderate depression, who can't afford new shoes for her children, and whose roof is leaking? The Prime Minister calls her a "neighbour from hell", and argues that she, and people like her, are part of a "culture of disruption and irresponsibility." ... 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. ... In other words, the "troubled families" in the Prime Minister's speech are not necessarily "neighbours from hell" at all. They are poor.⁸

⁶ Cabinet Office, 2007, *Families at Risk*

⁷ DCLG, 2012, *Troubled Family estimates explanatory note*, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/newsroom/pdf/2053538.pdf>

⁸ J Portes, 2012, "Neighbours from hell": who is the Prime Minister talking about?, Blog: *Not the Treasury View*, 27th February, <http://notthetreasuryview.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/families-from-hell-who-is-prime.html>

The central criticism made by Ruth Levitas⁹ or by Portes¹⁰ is that the indicators used to identify troubled families are not relevant to the claimed association with crime and anti-social behaviour. The statistics do not show that troubled families are the same as families that cause trouble, or that they are the ones who cost the money.

Meeting the tests

The key tests implied by the Code of Practice are tests of integrity and prior publication. The first key statistic is the number of 'troubled families'. The integrity of the figures depends on the publication of enough information to evaluate the data. That information is there. It falls short of "sound methods and assured quality", because, whether or not the numbers make any sense (which is debatable – they come from area-based data, not statistics on families), it is not a count of troubled families; it is a count of something else. On the issue of prior publication, the figure of 120,000 families is at least arguably derived from the 2007 Cabinet Office report. On page 4 of that document it is explained that 140,000 families with children experience five or more disadvantages. This number, Levitas explains, was scaled down to 117,000 for England, and rounded to 120,000. An explanatory note from the Department of Education provides more detailed local figures and data;¹¹ its publication, appearing on their website as background for materials on community planning, was obscure, but at least it was published.

The second key statistic is about the cost of dealing with troubled families. It is difficult to judge integrity because hardly any information is available. The DCLG statement apparently bases its

⁹ R Levitas, 2012, *There may be trouble ahead*, Bristol: PSE UK, www.poverty.ac.uk/sites/poverty/files/WP%20Policy%20Response%20No.3-%20%20%27Trouble%27%20ahead%20%28Levitas%20Final%2021April2012%29.pdf

¹⁰ J Portes, 2012, The Government continues to abuse the data on "troubled families", *Not the Treasury View*, 10th June <http://notthetreasuryview.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/government-continues-to-abuse-data-on.html>

¹¹ Department for Education Advisory Note, *Indicative distribution of Families with Multiple Problems (FMP) (based on deprivation and child well being index scores of local authorities)* <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/doc/e/estimated%20distribution%20of%20families%20with%20multiple%20problems%20as%20at%20march%202011.doc>

statements in "government data collected in October and November 2011". Prior publication is easier to assess; there has been none. No details have yet been published to explain the estimated cost of £9 billion, or £75,000 per family. "We've come up with the actual figures", the PM's statement says; two of the departmental statements above refer to indicators within the data. A Freedom of Information request from David Gordon to the Department of Communities and Local Government was met with this response in June 2012:

We take the view that breaking down the £9bn figure earlier without a clear accompanying explanation could potentially confuse rather than inform public debate. We therefore believe that the public interest is served by waiting to publish a more comprehensive and accessible piece of work than we would be able to provide in response to your request at this time.

In other words, detailed statistical information should follow announcements about policy, rather than the other way around. This directly contradicts Principle 3 of the Code of Practice.

Policing official statistics

The DCLG has told me that the figures in question are not official statistics.

"The Department has not declared that the information referred to should be regarded, and thus handled, as 'official statistics' ... Consequently, the information does not (currently) come within the scope of statistical legislation; thus, does not fall within the remit of the UK Statistics Authority, and so was not handled in accordance with the principles and rules set out in the Code of Practice."¹²

That interpretation opens the door to the possibility that there will be two sorts of official statistics – the formal sort, which meet professional standards, and the others which don't. But it would be

¹² www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/publication_of_official_statistics#incoming-347648

rather difficult for the public, if that were the case, to know which is which - the *Daily Telegraph* directly refers to the statistics on troubled families as "official figures",¹³ and it is easy to see why they think so.

The UK Statistics Authority relies on soft power, rather than direct sanctions. The main way that they can exercise any influence is to engage with departments and negotiate an understanding. They have told me in relation to other queries that:

We may conclude that the various claims made are outside our formal remit but even if that is the case we could still comment if we decided that apparently 'statistical' observations made in the course of public debate were tending to reduce confidence in the relevant official statistics.

If their role is to protect the integrity of official statistics, the UKSA needs to discourage the kind of practice described here.

Paul Spicker is Grampian Chair of Public Policy at Robert Gordon University and Director of the Centre for Public Policy and Management.

Email: p.spicker@rgu.ac.uk

¹³ www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/9631820/Benefits-encourage-problem-families-says-Iain-Duncan-Smith.html