

**Being tough on the causes
of crime:
Tackling family breakdown
to prevent youth crime**

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Introduction: What ‘causes’ youth crime?

The recent spate of South London gun killings which has taken such young lives has horrified and saddened the nation. However in the rush to be seen to take action, a two dimensional target has been created. The notion of the dangerous and criminal child has dominated, with arguments focusing on the appropriate length of sentence for firearm possession. Neglected is the understanding that gang membership and carrying a lethal weapon are iconic proxies for belonging and being worthy of respect. Gangs are crowded with boys who have never been part of an intact family, where people belonged with and to each other. The same boys may never have known the innate respect which flows from having access to a father’s love and direction. They cannot survive in an emotional vacuum and their absent fathers know it.

The killer of Mary Anne Leneman was abandoned by his father at an early age. This father recently spoke on the radio about his son. He was able to articulate his clear understanding that his absence from his sons life while he grew up, had everything to do with the murder and rape of Mary Anne Leneman. Those at the heart of the searing misery now seem better placed to articulate the true causes of youth crime than the protagonists at the heart of the political debate. The right target at this time has to be family breakdown and these tragic circumstances provide an important opportunity to avoid the knee-jerk reaction and look for underlying causes. They are many and complex but embedded in them all is the dysfunction and dadlessness resulting from family breakdown.

1. The Cycle of Deprivation

In trying to find a way to tackle the main drivers of poverty, the general approach of this Government has been too short term, relying on knee-jerk reactions, minor changes to legislation and headlines to be the guide. We often failed to recognise that the ‘pathways to poverty’ and the corresponding link to crime, are so fundamentally interlinked that we must adopt a more holistic, coherent approach when forming policy.

After all, it is no coincidence that so many disaffected young people have a multitude of social problems, and that unless we endeavour to tackle poverty as a whole, our efforts are bound to fail. We know that the majority of young offenders come from broken homes, nearly two thirds have drug and alcohol addiction problems, more than three in four have no educational qualifications and many young prisoners have mental health problems rooted in drug abuse.

It is for this reason that the Social Justice Policy Group has been committed to tackling the six “pathways to poverty”. Its six working groups have covered family breakdown, educational failure, addictions, economic dependence, serious personal debt and the vital role which the voluntary sector plays in tackling these drivers.

All of the findings of our “Breakdown Britain” report, published in December 2006, reinforced the point that unless we tackle the causes of crime then **so** many children will continue to be condemned to a life of poverty. The increasingly dysfunctional society described in the report is one which will continue to breed criminality. As such, all welfare reform should have at its heart the strengthening of families.

2. The Importance of the Home Context

Academics¹ who have conducted empirical studies in juvenile criminology, point to the overwhelming need to look at the home context. They state that early prevention that fosters an ideology that *links* [our emphasis] family problems, social inequality, economic deprivation and juvenile offending should be the basis of any attempt to reduce the risk of engaging in offending behaviour. The Social Justice Policy Group’s interim report (published in December 2006) implicated debt, economic dependency, failed education, drugs and alcohol addiction as contributors to family breakdown, which in turn is implicated so often in criminality. In making these correlations we drew upon a robust evidence base. Research studies conducted in the UK, US, China, New Zealand, Scandinavia, Hong Kong and Taiwan all agree that the following are risk factors or indicators of susceptibility to youth criminal activity:²

- Inadequate parenting
- Child abuses/maltreatment
- Family disruption
- Poor parental supervision
- Parental or sibling criminality
- Having teenage parents
- Unstable living conditions
- The effects of economic disadvantage

3. Prevention before Punishment?

It is right that a Government should seek to protect its citizens as its first priority. However, the current emphasis on reforming legislation and increasing penalties for offenders will do little to stop the next generation of prisoners and unlock the cycle of deprivation which so many young people are trapped in, unless it is accompanied by attempt to tackle the underlying drivers of crime. Yet this Government has got the balance wrong; all its energies are directed at punishing those whose lives are products of a fractured society without tackling the causes of crime in a holistic way.

The British public is in favour of a ‘crime prevention’ approach. A recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation study³ looking at national attitudes towards anti-social behaviour reports that

¹ Arthur R., 2007, *Family Life and Youth Offending: Home is where the hurt is*, Routledge

² See Arthur 2007:9

³ Millie A., Jacobson J., McDonald E., & Hough M., 2005 *Anti-social behaviour strategies: Finding a balance* JRF/The Policy Press

two thirds of the population favoured preventative action over punitive action against perpetrators and recommends that ASB strategies should aim for a balance between enforcement and prevention.

Other jurisdictions have also become far more punitive in their approach. Until the last quarter of the 20th century, the juvenile court in the US was viewed as the “nexus where psychology and philanthropy were to combine and place a rational and loving hand on wayward youth.”⁴ In 1974 the US Congress gave top priority to youth crime prevention by addressing, among other factors, family problems, adopting the approach recommended by the Crime Commission of 1967. Today however, the US youth justice system has reconceptualised youth offenders as violent predators, warranting retribution, rather than as wayward children in need of a guiding hand.

This paper argues that in order to avoid tackling the symptom and not the cause, the spotlight has to be turned on the family. Most British families function well, nurturing children to become law-abiding citizens. Broken families, however, are often the places where the seeds are sown for future criminal activity. The Social Justice Policy Group’s report “Fractured Families” looked at the role of family breakdown in pathways to crime and disadvantage and drew attention to three distinct but overlapping forms of family breakdown.

- Dissolution (where parents part after having children together),
- Dysfunction (where parents are not able to provide their children with a sufficiently nurturing environment) and
- ‘Dadlessness’ (15% of all of the UK’s children grow up without a resident father – many of these dads may never have been committed to their children’s mother and are unable to provide the essential security which children need as their identities form).

In terms of early indicators of criminal behaviour, children who experience family breakdown in all its forms are twice as likely to have behavioural problems, perform less well in school, suffer depression and turn to drugs, smoking and heavy drinking.⁵ In the late 20th century, widespread family breakdown was the unavoidable consequence of the stripping away of institutional supports for marriage combined with a massive cultural shift in our view of commitment and an overemphasis on the right to personal happiness and immediate gratification. Geoff Mulgan says it is “an adolescent society which values above everything else individuals’ freedom to make themselves, to escape and satisfy their desires” and societies only become truly adult by accepting that they live in a web of mutual interdependence. We need policies which implicitly assume the worth of long term domestic stability. In addressing what it considers to be the root causes of youth crime, this paper will focus on dadlessness and dysfunction and briefly mention interventions and policy solutions implemented in other countries.

⁴ Simon J., 1995, ‘Power without Parents: Juvenile Justice in a Post-modern Society’ *Cardozo Law Review* 16:1364

⁵ Rodgers, B. and Prior, J., 1998, *Divorce and Separation: The Outcomes for Children*, JRF; McCarthy et al, 2004, DFES review p66

4. 'Dadlessness'

"My dad walked out when I was young. Once my mum had a new boyfriend, she had more time for him and less time for me. I started going wrong at school. My head just went everywhere. Come 14 or 15 I dropped out of school. I got into fights hoping that I wouldn't live through. I took drugs. Me and the boyfriend got into a fight. The police were called. She wouldn't leave him. So I walked out."

YMCA tenant - evidence to the Social Justice Policy Group

My dad left when I was about seven or eight, and then we lost the house and we moved onto the estate. My mum had to go out and work and get as much money as she could; it was quite difficult getting the maintenance off my father anyway. We were left to it really. We were always scruffy, and I suppose rather than be picked on, I stood up for myself, so I soon gained a reputation as that sort of fighting boy. I drank to get drunk from about nine or ten years old, I was out roaming the streets to all hours of the night. There were letters threatening to exclude me from school within weeks of me being there, and by the time I was twelve my behaviour was off the wall and she put me into care. Within a week I was introduced to solvent abuse and began experimenting with cannabis. I also clocked up my first criminal conviction for shoplifting. Between the ages of fourteen and sixteen I was moved constantly and also expanded my drug scope to include speed and LSD. My criminal record also expanded. At sixteen years old I received my first custodial sentence. By the time I was nineteen I'd been back twice and had begun taking heroin. Between then and twenty-four I was constantly in and out, more in. Then it was just in. I received seven years imprisonment for drug offences.

Craig (former addict) - evidence to the Social Justice Policy Group

"Didn't really know me Dad. I felt that if he didn't care then neither did I. I hated school. But I think if dad had been around it wouldn't have been so bad as he could have helped me"

"My dad spent a lot of time in prison when I was little. So I didn't have him around to push me when I needed it".

"I hate my dad for leaving us".

Three young people on an Entry to Employment scheme (for youth who have been excluded from school or who have left with no qualifications and few life skills)

We all know children who were raised well by lone parents, but the evidence of a series of UK longitudinal studies shows strong correlations between broken homes and delinquency.⁶ 70% of young offenders come from lone-parent families.⁷ Compared to children in two parent families, children in one parent families are significantly more likely to smoke weekly (2.4 times at age 12, 1.7 times at age 17), drink weekly (1.6 times at age 12, 1.1 times at age

⁶ Wadsworth, M., 1979 National Survey of Health and Development 1946 cohort; Colvin et al, 1990, *Continuities of Deprivation: Newcastle 1,000 Family Study*; Farrington and West, 1990, *The Cambridge study in delinquent development*

⁷ Youth Justice Board, 2002

17), and take drugs weekly (1.7 times at age 13, 1.4 times at age 17).⁸ These statistics are not surprising when all the other disadvantages which cluster around growing up without two parents (usually without the birth father) are taken into account. Children whose parents did not marry are far more likely to grow up with only one parent, and low-income women are far more likely not to marry before having children.

American researchers⁹ talk about a 'Marriage Gap' which is opening up between middle class and low-income women and this analysis has implications for countries like our own which see lone parenthood concentrated in the poorer deciles – the Family Resource Survey showed that between 2002 and 2005 lone parents risk of poverty was 48% (compared with 19% for a couple with children.) Eminent researchers like Professor Jonathan Bradshaw and Donald Hirsch despair of targets for reducing child poverty being met in 2010 and 2020 unless new strategies are adopted. Significant increases in tax credits and welfare benefits will not, on their own, break the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage that many poor people are locked into because the disadvantages they face are not merely financial but also cultural. As stated earlier, systemic problems of debt, entrapment in a web of welfare dependency, educational failure and addiction to drugs and alcohol cause and are caused by family breakdown. As a result the most salient cultural aspect of their disadvantage is the lack of social capital available for the successful raising of happy and well-balanced children.

The Marriage Gap thesis has emerged from the observation that after 1970 women at all income levels began to marry at older ages, but where mothers higher up the income scale put off having children until they were married, working or gaining degrees in the intervening period, women in the lowest deciles did neither. As Hymowitz states, "the results radically split the experiences of children. Children in the top quartile now have mothers who not only are more likely to be married but also are older, more mature, better educated and nearly three times as likely to be employed as are mothers in the bottom quartile." Moreover top quartile children also get the benefit of more time and money from their live-in fathers. Children born at the bottom of the income scale have access to far fewer resources, including social capital, because their mothers are less established in their own identities, they are less educated, poorer and, most importantly, are struggling to fill the shoes of absent fathers.

Fathers rights organizations point to the infrequency with which fathers are completely absent from their children's lives, many live nearby and might be described as 'visiting' or 'closely involved with' the child's mother. However, children born in these circumstances experience qualitatively different parenting from both their mothers and fathers to those born into a stable and healthy married partnership.

One single parent told our policy group that "my ex (cohabiting father of her two children) says he is doing his bit because he pays out 20% of his wages and has the boys every other weekend and one evening a week, but I am giving 100% of my earnings, time and energy just to keep us afloat. I've had to do parenting classes because my eldest boy is so unsettled at

⁸ McVie S. & Holmes L., 2005, Family Functioning and Substance Use at Ages 12 to 17, Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime Report Number 9, pp.11-12

⁹ Hymowitz K., 2006, *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a post-marital age*, Ivan R Dee

school and he has said to me 'we must be rubbish if Daddy doesn't want to live with us any more.'"

Child Support Agency

The expectation of reliable and regular financial support from non-resident parents is essential for communicating the message that it is they and not the state who are ultimately responsible for children's material well-being. Moreover a study published in *The Economic Journal* (2006) found that the introduction of the CSA, despite its incompetence, has in many cases helped keep families together and led to a 15% fall in divorce among couples with dependent children. Such data suggests that knowing that ongoing financial support will be mandatory has acted as a disincentive to many fathers (or higher-earning mothers) walking away from their families. Similarly, a new emphasis on the involvement of both parents post-separation and the relative infrequency of anything resembling a 'clean break' may have also acted to keep families together. Knowing that parents will have to cooperate to organize ongoing contact dispels the idea that separation will prevent the need for any further involvement with an estranged partner or spouse.

However, financial resource is only one aspect of fathering provision (assuming that it is the father who is absent). Professor Sara McLanahan found that in Britain (and Europe), although welfare support for lone-parents is much higher than in the US, children in these families are getting less of just about everything that we know leads to successful adulthood.¹⁰ Children with two parents have more access to adult time and attention, two potential wages are coming into the household, forming a cushion against adversity. Where the two people who were responsible for them even existing in the first place have committed themselves to working out the vicissitudes of life together in partnership, this daily enacts a lesson of profound significance for children.

Marriage is not just a piece of paper (only 9% of people in the 2001-2 British Social Attitudes survey thought that it was, whereas 59% said it was the best kind of relationship). Its significance lies in the fact that it provides a meaningful and beneficial life script, a map of life that helps young people to plan, to be self-disciplined, to defer gratification. Success in today's knowledge economy depends upon these character qualities as never before. When marriage became optional, disadvantaged communities lost one of their few institutional supports for planning ahead and taking control of their lives.

A small minority of cohabitations are committed, well-considered (and concentrated in the higher income deciles), but many are not so much alternatives to marriage as alternatives to being single. Partners know they don't want to spend the rest of their lives with someone they are cohabiting with, but they don't want to be on their own either. When children are born into this inherently fragile context one partner, usually the man, often feels trapped. Unsurprisingly 75% of all family breakdown involving children under 5 is between unmarried parents.¹¹

¹⁰ See Hymowitz 2006: 23

¹¹ Calculated by Benson using data extrapolated from Kiernan, K., 1999, "Childbearing outside marriage in Western Europe" *Population Trends*, Vol. 98, 11-20

Finally, it is essential to balance these comments about fatherlessness with an awareness that many have been excluded from family life against their wishes and without due cause. The Social Justice Policy Group talked to fathers who felt that generous financial state provision incentivised their wives to kick them out. Many fathers feel shut out of decisions by services, such as maternity services, which focus on the mother and ignore their aspirations to be involved. The irony is that for many disadvantaged young fathers more active engagement with their children could be redemptive – if they were helped to overcome the relational difficulties which are often the result of their own lack of nurture.

5. Dysfunctional families

“Fractured Families”, the interim Report of the Family Breakdown Working Group, found that children of neglectful parents are more likely to suffer impaired psychological development and be at increased risk of drug and alcohol abuse and delinquency. Many clinicians and researchers working in the area of child development, trauma and neurology propose that a “propensity to violence develops primarily from wrong treatment before the age of 3.”¹² Violence is then triggered in individuals with this propensity by various stressors and may be exacerbated by alcohol, drugs and pornography. The increased perpetration of violence by adolescents is related to a reduction in social control and supervision of their leisure time; a huge rise in teenage alcohol consumption and drug taking; TV/DVD/computer games modelling violence and pornography; inconsistent parenting and the reduction in stable marital relationships.¹³

One of the key inhibitors of developing a propensity to violence is acquiring empathy.¹⁴ Parental separation and family dysfunction disrupt potential and established attachment patterns preventing the acquisition of this empathy. Rod Morgan, former Chairman of the Youth Justice Board, describes juvenile offenders as being: “the most troubled and troublesome children in our society” drawn mainly from families which have repeatedly broken down internally and externally.¹⁵ Persistent and serious offenders seem to have experienced particularly problematic childhoods in terms of deprivation and inadequate parenting.

Again, Arthur (2007) makes the important point that this is not just about poverty. “Children from deprived backgrounds who avoided a criminal record had tended to enjoy good parental care and supervision in a less crowded home. The statistical connection between socioeconomic status and children’s early offending behaviour was entirely mediated by family management practices.” This is not a new conclusion. The first public body to investigate youth offending established in 1815 was the Committee for Investigating the Causes of the Alarming Increase of Juvenile Delinquency in the Metropolis. The committee’s evidence was taken from interviews of children who were already imprisoned and it concluded that among the main causes of juvenile offending in Europe’s developing

¹² www.wavetrust.org

¹³ Margo, J. and Dixon, M, 2006, *Freedom’s Orphans: Raising Youth in a changing world*, ippr

¹⁴ Siegel D., 1999, *The Developing Mind*, Guilford Press; & de Zulueta F., 2006, *From Pain to Violence, the traumatic roots of destructiveness*. Chichester, John Wiley and Sons

¹⁵ Morgan R., et al, 2006, *Improving Provision for Children who Offend*, Karnac Publishing

and industrializing capital city were “the improper conduct of parents and the want of education.” The causes of crime were found to be firmly rooted in the quality of care provided by the parents and educational failure.

Dysfunctional Families and Addiction

Nearly one and a half million children are growing up in substance-abusing households – over a million with parents abusing alcohol and around 350,000 where there is drug- taking. Parental addiction or substance misuse leaves children neglected, un-nurtured, exposed to abuse inside and outside of the home and having to fight to survive.

Family breakdown also acts as a trigger for parental alcohol and drug abuse which are then implicated in physical and sexual abuse and neglect. 40% of children calling Childline Scotland¹⁶ who were ringing up mainly with concerns about their parents alcohol problems, also reported that they were abused. Similarly, 30% of children citing physical abuse as an issue, described drug abuse as the main problem affecting their parents.

Dysfunctional Families and Educational Failure

The interim report of the Educational Failure working group outlines the negative consequences for children with dysfunctional families. In particular, it cites the importance of cultural factors in affecting negative educational outcomes for children in deprived communities.

Poor children from Chinese and Indian backgrounds, where family structures are strong and learning is highly valued, dramatically outscore children from homes where these values are often missing, suggesting that culture, not ethnicity or cash is the key to educational achievement.

Only 17 per cent of white working class boys gain five or more A-C grades at GCSE, slightly fewer than the 19 per cent of black Caribbean boys of similar backgrounds attaining this benchmark. But among boys from low income Chinese families, the success rate is 69 per cent¹⁷.

The policy-making implications are clear. To improve social mobility, increase life opportunity for young people and to prevent the growth of an uneducated and unemployable underclass of forgotten children, we have to get both parents to engage in their learning and schooling from an early age

6. Breaking the cycle

All of our work has convinced us that if we really want to unlock this cycle of deprivation and do something to help the next generation of prisoners, we need to strengthen families

¹⁶ Ogilvie-Whyte, S.; Backett-Milburn K.; Morton, S. Houston, A.; Wales, A. 2005, Children’s Concerns about the health and wellbeing of parents and significant others, CRFR/Childline Scotland

¹⁷ www.dfes.gov.uk, KS4 Results by ethnicity, 2004

and ensure children grow up in stable families. Improving the quality of the social structure of our lives is the key to tackling poverty so strengthening the welfare society must be at the centre of any process of renewal.

Today, many young people on anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) have grown up in a fragile family, with a constantly shifting membership as parents' partners (and step-siblings) have come and gone. Many have never experienced the benefits of a committed relationship and will seek short-lived affection where they can find it. 25% of young offenders are already fathers themselves. Policy initiatives are required to break the vicious cycle so that the next generation do not grow up in a fatherless family. Youth offending can lead to a lifetime of crime but a study following juvenile delinquents over more than fifty years showed that re-offending rates were far lower among young men who formed committed, lasting relationships upon completing their sentences.¹⁸

The Social Exclusion Unit found that prisoners who maintain contact with their family are up to six times less likely to re-offend upon release.¹⁹ However 45% of prisoners lose contact with their family whilst inside. If prisoners' families influence re-offending rates so markedly then, whatever one's view of the function of incarceration, our criminal justice system must do all it can to impart essential relationship and life skills. Imprisonment provides an opportunity to deliver training and education which may radically transform their outlook on life and their ability to handle their relationships and financial affairs. Policies supporting such provision will give prisoners a substantive second chance to pick up the lifeskills which others were fortunate enough to learn either in loving, stable families or in mainstream education.

One organization is delivering courses called "Building Stronger Families" This innovative 6-day programme could be used in all UK prisons, and is designed to embed relationship and domestic finance skills in the offender/ex-offender community and their families. Prisoners are more receptive to this than many might imagine. The organization, Time for Families, has found that demand exceeds supply. Prisoners, and their partners on the outside are queuing up in eleven prisons to be trained in communication skills, responsible parenting and sound financial management. It is giving them hope that things might be different when they finish their sentences. Adjustment can be painful when ex-offenders are reunited with their families, however much everyone has looked forward to being together again, but programmes like this equip people to handle transitions better.

This course also develops innovative peer training and mentoring and several prisoners and their partners in Brixton are now part of the teaching team. The zeal of Brixton prison's governor, John Podmore, is behind this scheme, particularly as his officers have reported visible positive changes in behaviour on the wings of prisoner participants. Many of our 80,000 strong prison population did not grow up in homes where healthy, committed relationships were the norm. This training could break inter-generational cycles of domestic

¹⁸ Laub J. & Sampson R., 2003 *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70* Harvard University Press

¹⁹ Social Exclusion Unit Report: Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners, 2002

violence and fatherlessness and should, in time, be treated as a key, mainstream tool for the development of protective factors against re-offending.

7. International solutions

The Social Justice Policy Group has strived to ensure our policy recommendations are rooted in best practice and “what works”. One part of this is looking at the highly innovative response of the voluntary sector to the diverse social problems in the UK and finding ways to harness and strengthen its contribution to tackling poverty. The other part is looking at the many overseas initiatives which are tackling many of the same social problems.

The Addictions working group have been on visits to Holland and Sweden to look at their hugely successful drug rehabilitation programmes, the Education working group are off to Washington, New York and Pennsylvania in April to look at how they are tackling the poor educational outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the Economic Dependence Working group traveling to Australia and Wisconsin to analyze their “Welfare to Work Programmes”.

The family working group has also been struck by the diversity and success of policy initiatives around the world to strengthen family life and prevent young people drifting towards a life of crime.

Scandinavia

Other jurisdictions have avoided adopting a punitive stance towards juvenile crime. In Finland young offenders are seen as being in need of care, supervision and protection, rather than punishment. Similarly in Denmark and Sweden, where young people under the age of 18 commit offences, social welfare authorities intervene and make decisions about an appropriate reaction based solely on the young person’s social and family situation.

Scotland

Closer to home, Scotland’s treatment of youth offending is almost wholly conducted within the welfare system. Based on the Kilbrandon Report of 1964, the assumption is that the problems of the delinquent child can be traced to shortcomings in the child’s upbringing process, in either the home, family environment or the school.

This paper has highlighted the need to acknowledge that healthy marriage can provide a better environment for the raising of children. They are far less likely to experience family breakdown where parents have made a clear commitment to stay together. Commentators are beginning to acknowledge that marriage provides better outcomes but insist that we cannot force people to marry especially where relational skills are lacking. That lack will be most keenly felt by individuals brought up in the kind of fractured family described above. Other countries are learning that relationship education imparts positive behaviours and attitudes which can be learned and put into practice to turn a fragile family or relationship into a thriving one.

Australia

Australia is setting up 65 Relationship Centres in cities and towns across the country which will be a source of information for families at all stages, including people starting relationships, those wanting to make their relationships stronger and those having relationship difficulties. A quarter of the centres have already begun to function. They provide a significant community-based resource run by a variety of organization that are experienced in providing support, advice and dispute resolution services to families. These centres signpost families towards existing services in Australia, such as early intervention services that help prevent relationships from breaking down. Staff have received specialized training to be able to sensitively screen clients for family violence and child abuse issues. Centres are intended to make it easier for separating parents to reach equitable and amicable agreements and to stay out of the courts where possible. When it is appropriate (in contexts free from violence and abuse) they help them to come to arrangements which enable shared parental responsibility to be meaningful, so that even when mum and dad cannot work it out together, their children do not lose contact with a non-resident parent.

As well as relationship centres the Australian government is setting up relationship services for men, increasing funding for the delivery of specialized family violence services for *Mensline Australia* and providing new pre-marriage and family education services to help people form and maintain positive family relationships. They seem to be balancing the need to strengthen families and thus prevent breakdown with the need for expert help when families struggle to stay together.

US

The link between a decline in marriage and a surge in welfare dependency was made by the architects of US Welfare Reform in 1996. Welfare became temporary assistance, a helping hand for a limited period, rather than a way of life. Crucially however, time-limited entitlement was tied to vocational and life skills training ie. to giving people maximum assistance to make a better future for themselves. Unskilled workers in Wisconsin who were forced by welfare reform into the low wage labour market were aided by nationally recognized models of employment-linked training such as Big Step Apprenticeship schemes. Women who had previously not been able to see beyond a meagre life on benefits were enabled to gain further education and, ultimately, jobs which exceeded their expectations.

The legislation also stipulated that measures be taken to strengthen and support marriage and to reduce the occurrence of unwed childbearing. States like Oklahoma, which made such measures a policy priority, saw welfare rolls fall by two thirds. Arguably the most advanced marriage and relationship education project in the world is based in Oklahoma City, USA. which has integrated robustly researched relationship education programmes into mainstream public sector service provision.

Despite initial scepticism, political support for what is known as the Oklahoma Healthy Marriage Initiative is now broad. Senior state figures who had the strongest reservations now welcome the project because it isn't just telling people how they should live. Services target low income families and deal well with the issue of domestic violence. The initiative is generously funded with incentive schemes which are proving effective in attracting the people the programme wishes to reach – especially low income families with young children. These families are accessed at key life stages when they are more likely to be responsive to

such interventions, such as when they are having a baby, sending children to school, seeing children leave home, in prison. Gold standard evaluations are enabling constant improvements to take place and feedback from participants is quickly integrated into curriculum design.

Early signs of success from Oklahoma indicated that poverty could be successfully tackled by encouraging and supporting healthy marriage and stable relationships. As a result, the US-wide Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2001 provided targeted, federal support for programmes to help build healthy marriages.

The Social Justice Policy Group visited relationship education programmes in poor black communities in Washington DC. Young, unmarried parents were learning how to make a marriage work, they are being supported to fulfil the aspiration to marry that so many of them have when their babies are born. Healthy Marriage Initiative programmes unapologetically talk about marriage and commitment but are open to all. The unmarried are not stigmatized but neither are marriage and cohabitation treated as if they were identical – the underlying attitudes, behaviours and, most importantly, outcomes for children tend to be very different.

Programmes and services that take advantage of the ‘magic moment’ straight after the birth could be replicated in Britain where 96% of parents are ‘together’ when a baby is born. The best programmes will engage with the dads as much as with the mums. UK research consistently shows that these young men are far more interested in fatherhood than services think they are - but the quality of relationship with the child’s mother is the strongest predictor of the dad’s involvement in his child’s life.

Conclusion

Punitive measures to curb anti-social behaviour and youth crime will, like purely economic measures to combat poverty, fail to address the cultural drivers of the problems. Family circumstances in general and family breakdown in particular have tended to be neglected dimensions in policy initiatives which are preventative in their focus. We need policies which implicitly assume the worth of long term domestic stability and which therefore support and encourage healthy marriage as the relationship most likely to deliver that social good. We are not treating marriage like a magic bullet: the Social Justice Policy Group is tackling debt, educational failure, addiction and economic dependency, all of which lead to family breakdown, and establish the cycle of deprivation.

We believe that unless we try now to understand how important stable families are to reducing crime and particularly youth crime, we risk making young people the target. It is the child who grows up in a broken home with an absent father involved in crime who is most likely to commit crime themselves - and become a father himself at a very young age. Unchecked, the cycle looks set to continue and to multiply in its effects. Just threatening to lock young people up will not break the cycle. Of course criminals need to face penalties for their actions but we desperately need to deal with the reasons why they are committing crime in the first place. Otherwise we move from being “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime” to being “tough on headlines, soft on the causes of the headline.”

