

# VIEWS & REVIEWS

## MEDICAL CLASSICS

### Families without hope

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#### **Families without hope: a controlled study of 33 problem families**

Tonge WL, James DS, Hillam SM

Special Publications No 11. Royal College of Psychiatrists, 1975

When Jesus said “the poor always ye have with you,” he presumably wasn’t joking, but governments repeatedly try to prove him wrong. Every time a new underclass disaster makes headlines, the social work equivalent of the SAS is mobilised to persuade the family to become, well, “more like us,” but it rarely works. *Families Without Hope* explains why and describes some typical families.

“The front garden is characteristic. An overgrowth of natural flora competes with broken bottles, sodden cardboard and the rusting remains of once-expensive toys, prams, cycle parts and other scrap. A well-worn earth path leads from the dominant door to the pavement by the most direct route which involves a hole in the hedge or a section of shattered fencing. Furnishings were usually basic, dilapidated and inadequate, while priorities for spending were often given to luxury items, even when essentials were lacking.” Families bought expensive chocolates “given inconsistently to their untrained children to placate their temper tantrums” or “spent a considerable portion of [their] assistance money on drink,” but the main problems were attitudinal, not material. “It takes forethought to do all that these families failed to do. This is a style of life which shuts its eyes to the future.” The television set was prominent, but its value “lay more in its capacity to distract than to inform.”

This very depressing study took place in Sheffield, at a time when society was arguably less broken than it is now and fewer women drank heavily. Its findings were not unique. An earlier

researcher concluded: “The most striking characteristic of these families is that they are *families of children*.... You could hardly distinguish the adults from the children except for the fact that the former were taller.” Overt mental illness was largely absent, unless we regard unhappiness, improvidence, and ignorance as illnesses. The several agencies specifically designated to help had tried hard, but problems simply increased to occupy the facilities for their alleviation, in a mocking, therapeutic version of Parkinson’s Law. Similar problems had often characterised previous generations of the same families, yet most literature “avoids ... discussion of constitutional factors, perhaps in an attempt to deny the pessimism of the eugenisists.” Pessimism, nevertheless, is hard to avoid. More money might increase the chocolate supply, so to speak, but “would leave many other difficulties untouched.”

These difficulties are formidable. “Rules are ignored ... discomfort is ignored ... long term consequences of action are ignored ... education is distrusted.” If we hear more about such families today than in the early 1970s, it may be because social mobility has rewarded others who were equally poor but whose members had no major and persistent personality defects, leaving the untreatable even more glaringly exposed as monuments to our continuing impotence.

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