Risky people or risky societies? Rethinking interventions for young adults in transition

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Introduction

In a telling moment in his speech to the Labour Party Conference in September 2009 Gordon Brown turned his fire on families 'playing by different rules or no rules at all'. Most parents, he observed, 'do a great job – but there are those who let their kids run riot and I'm not prepared to accept it as simply part of life'. The Prime Minister went on to promise that 'every one of the 50,000 most chaotic families will be part of a family intervention project', a 'tough love, no nonsense approach with help for those who want to change and proper penalties for those who don't or won't'. (Brown, 2009).

Mr Brown's remarks reflect a longstanding preoccupation of the Labour government with intervening early into the lives of the young people and families who are deemed to be the likely source of criminality in later life. His predecessor, Tony Blair, expressed a similar view three years earlier in a speech in Bristol:

> *We need far earlier intervention with some of these families, who are often socially excluded and socially dysfunctional. That may mean before they offend; and certainly before they want such intervention. But in truth, we can identify such families virtually as their children are born.*

> (Blair, 2006)

He argued that this faced the government and country with 'some unpalatable choices about liberty and security', where the state's 'power to intervene' in the lives of 'dysfunctional families' needed to be enhanced. 'The "hardest to reach" families', he observed, 'are often the ones we need to reach most' (Blair, 2006).

A couple of years earlier, in an interview with *The Independent*, the then Home Office minister Hazel Blears was more explicit about the ability to predict future outcomes: 'We can predict the risk factors that will lead a child into offending behaviour,' she told the newspaper's chief political correspondent Marie Woolf. 'We need to track the children who are most at risk.' Having a father in prison was a 'huge risk factor', Ms Blears argued, as was being in the care system. 'Studies can ... predict with uncanny foresight which children are predisposed to a life of villainy,' observed Marie Woolf, drawing on Ms Blears' comments (Woolf, 2004).

The policy implications that flow from these claims are significant, justifying, for some, far-reaching, extensive and coercive interventions into the lives of individuals and their families. These interventions can be justified, supporters claim, because

the long-term benefit will be a society with fewer criminals and less crime. The problems facing young adults (those aged 16 to 24) in trouble with the law are intimately bound up in this policy agenda. If it is possible to identify the potential criminals of the future and to make effective interventions to prevent later offending, the benefits to society of fewer young adult offenders emerging from childhood would be significant. The risk-based policies currently being implemented in relation to children and young people might also be applicable to the older young adult population.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ideological and evidential basis for contemporary policy in relation to children, young people and crime, and its institutional and practice framework. It will do so by considering representative examples of current policy agendas and the intellectual underpinnings of those agendas.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section examines government policy in relation to so-called 'risk factors' for crime and offending, using the *Youth Crime Action Plan 2008* as the basis for discussion (HM Government, 2008). The second section explores the intellectual underpinnings of current government policy, examining the work of David Farrington, one of the most influential figures in risk factor research. The third section offers some critical reflections on the political context for current risk-based policies, drawing in particular on the work of Derrick Armstrong (Armstrong, 2004, 2006). The fourth section outlines a more satisfactory way of conceptualising the problems brought to the fore by risk factor research, drawing on recent work by public health specialists (Marmot and Wilkinson, 2006).

This paper is the first in a series of three papers which form part of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies' contribution to the Transition to Adulthood Alliance, established by the Barrow Cadbury Trust. It explores the conceptual challenges involved in developing a coherent and progressive policy approach towards supporting young adults in transition from childhood to adulthood.

1. Risk factors and crime: government approaches

The government's interest in risk-based approaches to tackling and preventing youth crime were evident from the start of its long period in office. The *No More Excuses* White Paper, published in 1997, promised 'a new focus on nipping crime in the bud – stopping children at risk from getting involved in crime'. It claimed that there were a 'range of risk factors' associated with youth crime, including 'psychological, family, social, economic and cultural factors' (HM Government, 1997). In 2001, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) published research which pulled together existing knowledge on risk and protective factors (Anderson et al., 2001). According to a summary of the research published by the YJB in 2005, it presented a compelling case for the adoption of a 'risk and protection factor' model in understanding and preventing youth crime' (YJB, 2005). The *Youth Crime Action Plan 2008* (HM Government, 2008), discussed below, continues this preoccupation.

The risk perspective also exercises a notable influence on broader government

policy in relation to children, families and young people. The landmark *Every Child Matters* Green Paper of 2003 observed that 'the risk of experiencing negative outcomes is concentrated in children with certain characteristics and experiences'. It went on to argue that '[w]e need a greater focus on ensuring children at risk are identified earlier' (HM Government, 2003). According to the 2005 *Youth Matters* Green Paper, the 'challenge is to provide more tailored and intensive support for each young person who has serious problems or gets into trouble ... the risk factors involved in many poor outcomes ... are often the same' (HM Government, 2005). *New Opportunities: Fair Chances for the Future*, the 2009 White Paper covering the challenges of 'the new global economy', is, likewise, littered with references to 'risk'. Given the subject matter, this is perhaps not wholly surprising. But its observations that 'child poverty means wasted talent, higher risk of crime, anti-social behaviour and other problems' is in keeping with the government's prevailing preoccupation with risk in relation to crime and youth justice policy (HM Government, 2009).

Turning now to the *Youth Crime Action Plan 2008* (HM Government, 2008; hereafter 'the Plan')*,* a central theme is the notion of early intervention to prevent later offending. 'Some children are ... at greater risk of offending,' the Plan claims. 'These children can often be identified early on,' it continues. Although the 'vast majority of young people grow up happily and successfully', a 'small ... minority ... become prolific and serious offenders ... People in this group ... can often be identified early when problems begin to manifest themselves,' it asserts.

Confident assertions about the youthful bliss of the 'vast majority' of children are belied by research data. Some 30 per cent of children in the UK are now estimated to be growing up in poverty once housing costs are factored in, compared with 15 per cent in the late 1970s. For inner London the figure is 48 per cent (CPAG, 2008). Adolescent mental health problems also appear to be a growing problem (Collishaw et al., 2004). A recent UNICEF assessment suggested that the UK scores badly across a range of measures of child and adolescent well-being when compared with other rich countries (UNICEF, 2007). There is not space here to develop these points. However, the Plan's conspicuous boosterism about the lives of most children and young people has an ideological utility in framing the policy challenge as being about intervening in the lives of a 'small minority' of troublemakers, rather than addressing more fundamental structural factors.

The Plan lists a number of individual and familial 'risk factors' apparently linked to offending. These include temperament problems, maltreatment, low IQ in either the mother or child, a parental conviction, an ADHD diagnosis, low socio-economic status and involvement with delinquent groups. 'Effective early intervention to address these risk factors,' the Plan claims, 'is not only a vital response to youth crime but also puts more young people on the path to success.'

Proposals are geared towards interventions that target 'risky' children, young people and their families: 'Our aim is to ensure that, by the end of the Comprehensive Spending Review period ... all of the 110,000 high risk families who need it will benefit from better targeting of support and services.' The Plan details a number of current initiatives: Sure Start centres, parenting programmes and children's trusts, for example. New initiatives proposed in the Plan continue this general policy

trajectory, toughening a number of aspects.

The proposal to strengthen family interventions, for instance, includes 'non-negotiable elements if families refuse to engage'. Schools will get wider powers to search for 'drugs, alcohol and other inappropriate items'. Youth offending teams will have wider powers to 'support' parents of young people in custody, making such support 'non-negotiable' if a parent does not take up such offers voluntarily. The remit of Family Nurse Partnerships (FNPs) – a voluntary programme offering intensive support to vulnerable first-time parents – will be expanded to include 'the prevention of crime and anti-social behaviour'. Plans to 'increase the engagement of parents with children in the youth justice system' could include placing a legal responsibility on them to ensure that their child completes his or her sentence.

The generally authoritarian tone of the Plan is captured well in the following, taken from the ministerial foreword:

> *On support, we will offer non-negotiable intervention to the families at greatest risk of serious offending. These are the families whose children are disrupting our classrooms – or worse, roaming the streets committing crime.*
>
> (HM Government, 2008)

When interventions are underpinned by the very real prospect of compulsion and informed by tabloid-style stereotyping of families and children, it is difficult not to conclude that professions of 'help' and 'support' are meretricious rather than sincere.

Concern about a criminal and disruptive minority is hardly new. Often referred to as the 'underclass', such groups have regularly been portrayed as dysfunctional families, mired in crime, poverty and irresponsibility, living at the margins of society (Welshman, 2006). Authoritarian and hardline policies to 'help' such individuals and groups have also been a regular governmental strategy. As Desmond King has shown, much that is illiberal has been justified in the name of liberalism (King, 1999).

But contemporary policy making in this area has been given added intellectual ballast and credibility by appearing to be drawn from recognised and significant academic research. Tony Blair's speech of 2006 mentioned above drew inspiration from, among other things, the work of the Cambridge academic Professor David Farrington (Downing Street, 2006). Indeed, through his work as director of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, and his broader championing of what he has dubbed the 'risk factor prevention paradigm' (Farrington, 2000), Farrington has probably been the most influential criminologist in governing circles over the past decade. It is to his work and the analysis he offers that this paper now turns.

2. Risk factors and crime: the research context

David Farrington is an extraordinarily prolific scholar. According to his page on the Institute of Criminology website, as of May 2009 he had authored or co-authored some 30 books, 40 monographs, 266 journal articles and 224 book chapters

(Farrington, 2009). To study Farrington's collected works in detail would in itself involve a lifetime's scholarship!

For the purposes of this paper, two representative articles have been chosen. The first is Farrington's 1999 presidential address to the American Society of Criminology, entitled 'Explaining and preventing crime: the globalization of knowledge'. The second is his contribution to the fourth edition of *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, the standard reference book in its field (Farrington 2000, 2007).

At the heart of the risk factor prevention paradigm, Farrington argues, is a 'very simple' idea: 'Identify the key risk factors for offending and implement prevention methods designed to counteract them.' Such an approach 'can be used not only to identify variables to be targeted, but also to identify persons to be targeted in an intervention programme' he argues. A 'key advantage' of the paradigm is that it bridges the apparent gulf between academic research and practical policy making; 'it links explanation and prevention, fundamental and applied research, and scholars and practitioners' (Farrington, 2000).

Seemingly eschewing grand theories and ideological debates, Farrington states that the risk factor prevention paradigm has an attraction precisely because it is 'easy to understand and communicate, and ... is readily accepted by policy makers, practitioners, and the general public'. He goes on to argue:

> *Both risk factors and interventions are based on empirical research rather than on theories. The paradigm avoids difficult theoretical questions about which risk factors have causal effects.*

> (Farrington, 2000)

The risk factor prevention paradigm itself has a utility precisely because it interlocks with and provides intellectual underpinning for contemporary policy preoccupations. The paradigm has been 'advocated or adopted in several countries, including the United States ... the United Kingdom ... Australia ... Sweden ... and the Netherlands' Farrington observes. 'Because of the perceived need to target interventions on high-risk individuals, there has been increasing interest in risk assessment in the 1990s' (Farrington, 2000).

Let us start by reflecting on what the risk factor prevention paradigm can and cannot assess and predict. The Plan, it will be remembered, expresses something of a bullish confidence that risk factors are a reliable means of predicting future offending and may be used as a reliable tool to inform interventions calibrated to reduce risk.

Farrington, a careful and conservative scholar in many ways, is rather more circumspect on this point. 'By definition,' he writes, 'a risk factor predicts an increased probability of later offending' (Farrington, 2000). It seems unnecessary to belabour the point that 'increased probability' is a very different matter from predicting future offending patterns with confidence. Yet it is a point worth making precisely because government pronouncements seem so regularly to ignore this rather mundane observation.

It is not difficult to find examples of the unreliability of risk factor research as a predictive tool. In 2005, the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* published a multi-authored analysis of data from Pittsburgh, which sought to predict violence and homicide based on a risk factor analysis of 1,517 boys. Farrington was the main UK-based collaborator. The proportion of 'false positive errors' thrown up by the analysis – ie 'individuals classified as homicide offenders who were not homicide offenders' – was 86.6 per cent. In lay person's terms, around nine out of ten individuals identified as a significant homicide risk did not commit a homicide. The model's 'negative predictive power' – those correctly identified as non-homicide offenders – was 98.9 per cent. But the 'positive predictive power' – the correct identification of homicide offenders – was a rather unimpressive 13.4 per cent. In other words, it barely predicted one in ten homicide offenders (Loeber et al., 2005).

The strength of such research is that it is rather more open about its limitations than government pronouncements on such matters. And it should be noted that Farrington himself is clear about the limitations of risk factor analysis. '[A]ny theory of the development of offending is inevitably speculative in the present state of knowledge,' he notes, not least because 'most risk factors tend to coincide and tend to be interrelated'. Risk factor analysis also tends to be much better at explaining links and associations after the event than predicting future behaviour. 'Typically, prospective prediction ... is poor but retrospective prediction ... is good' (Farrington, 2007).

Governmental pronouncements and policies based on the assumption that risk factor analysis can predict, with a degree of confidence, the future behaviours and life outcomes of certain children, young people and their families are not supported by the academic research reviewed in this paper.

Risk factor research identifies certain patterns and correlations retrospectively. At best, as Derrick Armstrong points out, it can account for 'a statistically significant proportion of the variance in respect of the antecedents correlating with offending' (Armstrong, 2004). But, as a predictive tool, risk factor analysis has limited utility. It might identify an increased *probability* of committing crime and/or being captured by the criminal justice system among certain population groups with shared characteristics. But, at the level of the individuals themselves, false positives and false negatives abound. The margin for error is very high. 'This sort of evidence,' Armstrong notes, 'is much more suited to generalizations about groups rather than predictions about individuals' (Armstrong, 2006).

It is difficult to imagine an empirically coherent, or socially just, set of interventions targeting supposedly risky individuals and families built on such a shaky predictive foundation.

3. The politics of risk

So far this paper has explored government approaches to 'risky' children and young people and considered the degree to which they are supported by academic

research. For a government officially committed to 'evidence-based policy', the mismatch between the limited current research knowledge and current policy agendas is striking. But perhaps government policy in this area is not simply based on the 'best' research evidence. As Armstrong points out, all sorts of political and ideological factors are at stake when it comes to the formulation of policy. Research forms 'only part of the context in which policy is formulated'. It is 'pure idealism' to think otherwise. Rather than thinking about 'evidence-based policy', Armstrong suggests that we should be thinking in terms of 'evidence-informed policy'. Research evidence might help to guide, and sometimes to justify, particular policy initiatives. But it will rarely if ever be the single determining factor (Armstrong, 2004). Beyond it lie high and low politics, moral judgments and certainties, ideological and class commitments.

To explore this point further, let us examine two related lines of criticism of the risk factor paradigm put forward by Armstrong. The first critique relates to definitional questions about crime, normality and deviancy. Far from being scientifically rigorous and neutral categories, Armstrong argues, they are the result of contested historical and political processes. They cannot be accepted uncritically. The second critique concerns the paradigm's preoccupation with risk factors as the properties of the individuals under analysis. This, argues Armstrong, ignores the fact that such factors are socially mediated. They are not, in other words, the deficits of individuals abstracted from wider social processes.

In the first critique, Armstrong is concerned with the process by which certain acts become defined as crime and the way in which deviance comes to be defined. He cites the examples of Sikhs refusing to wear motorcycle helmets and refusal to pay the poll tax as examples of illegal behaviour that is 'given meaning not by a propensity to rule-breaking behaviour per se but by a political challenge to the power of the state to establish and enforce these specific rules'. He goes on to argue:

> [I]t is meaningless to talk of criminal behaviour without such behaviour being situated in a broader social theory that seeks to explain the dialectical relationship between the social acts of individuals and social processes
>
> (Armstrong, 2004)

By assuming as given – the existence of some acts as *inherently* criminal – what is in fact the product of historically specific, often contested, acts of definition, the risk factor paradigm's reasoning is fallacious, Armstrong's contention would be.

The question of how certain types of behaviour come to be defined as deviant follows from the above. Take the example of 'anti-social' behaviour. Armstrong argues that the identification of behaviours as anti-social 'depends upon assumptions about "normality" and "abnormality", and, significantly, who is doing the defining'. The assessment of certain children and young people as anti-social 'is influenced as much by the concerns of those who make the assessment as by any clinical criteria' (Armstrong, 2006).

Some acts and behaviours – homicide, violent or sexual assault, intimidation and

threats, for example – would probably be defined as 'abnormal' and undesirable in any conceivable society that considered itself civilised. The argument about definitions of normality and abnormality should not, in other words, be pushed too far. Armstrong recognises this. He writes, for instance, that there is 'something wrong with a world where children can express such profound and often self-destructive alienation' (Armstrong, 2006). Indeed, his argument is not about the rights and wrong of graffiti, poll tax evasion or riding around without a motorcycle helmet. Rather, his concern is with the tendency of risk factor analysis to accept as unproblematic commonsense notions of normality and abnormality, criminality and lawfulness, rather than critically unpack them. As a result, it tends towards hiding the 'contested politics and ethics of social life ... behind a masquerade of expertise' (Armstrong, 2006). Armstrong is clear that questions of normality and criminality are legitimate and important questions. But they are 'more properly located in a public debate about social values, citizenship, and the politics of social inclusion and exclusion', not in a pseudo-scientific discourse that presents moral judgments as objective fact (Armstrong, 2004).

Armstrong's second critique relates to what he claims is the tendency of the risk factor paradigm to present 'social problems in terms of individual and micro-social risks which occur and are perpetuated within those domains' (Armstrong, 2006). Take the example of growing up in poverty, which risk factor research identifies as a factor increasing a child or young person's likelihood of committing crime or coming to the attention of the police and courts. In a simple sense, poverty could be considered the property of particular individuals – the poor – and not of other individuals – the rich and comfortably off. Moreover, living and growing up in poverty has a profound impact on a range of life chances. In this sense, living in poverty is a *particular* risk factor associated with *particular* individuals. Yet there is clearly a social and institutional dimension to poverty and income inequality that is beyond the control of those individuals who live 'in' poverty. As the political philosopher Brian Barry points out, 'it is social institutions that perpetuate cumulative inequality. If there is any determinism involved, it is political.' Barry goes on to argue that:

> *Almost every set of bad outcomes lends itself to two contrasting approaches: one that calls on individuals to adapt and one that demands changes in the environment.*

> (Barry, 2005)

In Armstrong's view, risk factor research drives policy making down the road of individual adaptation rather than far-reaching social reform: 'poverty, although recognized as a factor associated with high risk, is countered not by economic redistribution but by interventions aimed at supporting individuals at a micro level with the management of their own risk' (Armstrong, 2006).

The policy challenge then becomes, in essence, a 'crime management' challenge. Denying 'any social structural contribution to the construction and reproduction of offending behaviour', policy makers can focus their attention 'not on the causes of crime but rather on a policy of containment'. As John Pitts has observed:

In a time when politicians are unwilling to countenance robust social and economic intervention to counter social problems, and eager to demonstrate that they are 'tough on crime', an analysis which identifies poor child-rearing practices and weak parental control as the fundamental problem, and a strategy which targets families and classroom regimes and their capacity to inculcate self-control in unruly and disruptive children ... is a political godsend.'

(Cited in Armstrong, 2006).

4. Rethinking risk

This paper has reviewed the contemporary policy preoccupation with 'risky' young people and their families. It has considered the research base for current policy and unpicked the assumptions upon which policy is based. Risk factor research highlights certain correlations between individuals who have particular characteristics and an increased propensity to come to the attention of the criminal justice system. This has proven useful to policy makers eager to find a basis in research for policies that might otherwise be considered dubious, if not downright oppressive. As a predictive tool, however, risk factor analysis has little to offer. Policy interventions that seek to target individuals and their families on the basis of certain characteristics, with the intention of preventing future offending, have no obvious basis in current research. Risk factor research also operates with a number of assumptions that, on closer scrutiny, are problematic and, despite claims of scientific objectivity, are necessarily ideological. The nuances and qualifications have at times become lost in translation from the academy to Whitehall, but the focus on individual and micro-social risks has chimed with the priorities of policy makers.

It might be tempting to conclude that risk analysis has no role to play in contemporary policy making. This would be a mistake. The attempt to identify and intervene in the lives of individuals deemed to be a risk to others may be unlikely to result in a coherent and effective set of policy responses. But it is the case that different population groups in different parts of the country experience markedly different levels of risk: of early death; of poor mental health; of poverty; of homelessness; and so on. Young adult men, for instance, face a much higher risk of homicide than young adult women, or the population as a whole. Rates of suicide increase significantly among young adult men, and continue to increase throughout their late twenties and early thirties before starting to fall again (Shaw et al., 2008). The challenge is to rethink a policy framework that recognises the variable risks that different groups face in society, but without engaging in the dubious and ultimately futile exercise of identifying risky individuals.

In this final section, the paper considers how the question of risk might be more fruitfully thought through. Its starting point is a recent collection of essays by public health specialists exploring risk factors related to poor health outcomes (Marmot and Wilkinson, 2006). The contributions to this collection are notable for seeking to relate the 'micro' risk factors associated with particular health outcomes to the 'macro' factors – the more fundamental 'social determinants of health' – that interact with and shape the impact of the micro factors. Risk factor analysis was imported into

criminology from medicine and public health (Farrington, 2000). It therefore seems fitting to return to that field in search of a more nuanced and policy-relevant set of perspectives.

Within public health it is possible to identify certain individual risk factors associated with particular diseases. As Sir Michael Marmot points out in his introduction, smokers are at greater risk of developing various diseases than non-smokers, cardiovascular disease is associated with raised blood pressure or raised blood plasma cholesterol, and so on (Marmot, 2006). Using such biological markers, high-risk individuals 'suitable for special intervention' can be identified. Of course, such biological markers do not generally develop spontaneously. Behavioural factors – the decision to smoke or eat unhealthy food, for instance – interact with these biological factors in a significant manner:

> *From a public health viewpoint, it is perhaps more useful to think of behaviour (diet) as the cause of the disease rather than labelling plasma cholesterol (the biological effect of the diet) as causal.*

> (Marmot, 2006)

So far, this analysis – exploring the interaction between constitutional and behavioural factors at a micro level – is not dissimilar to that offered by Farrington and others engaged in criminological risk factor research. Its focus is on the individual and the implications and impacts of their decision making. The practical policy outcome of such analysis might be public education campaigns encouraging overweight people to eat less or smokers to quit their habit.

But the contributors to this collection of essays are interested in rather more fundamental questions about the (macro) social determinants of health that shape the (micro) behavioural and biological risk factors, the 'causes of these causes'. Marmot continues:

> *It is not an accident that people consume diets high in saturated fat and salt. It represents the nature of the food supply, culture, affordability, and availability, among other influences. These are the causes of the causes. For example, given that smoking is such an important cause of premature disease and death, we need to understand the social determinants of smoking. In particular, in many rich countries now, there is a social gradient in smoking: the lower the socio-economic position, the higher the rate of smoking.*

> (Marmot, 2006)

This perspective offers an important advance on and corrective to the criminological risk factor paradigm, and the governmental policies it buttresses, in three main ways.

First, it connects the study of micro risk factors with broader considerations of the macro social, economic and political context within which these micro factors unfold and shape the lives of individuals. The life course, David Blane points out in his contribution, 'may be regarded as combining biological and social elements which

interact with each other. Individual biological development takes place within a social context which structures life chances' (Blane, 2006). The variable risks that individuals face and embrace cannot be separated from the broader social context within which their lives, and the risks they experience, unfold.

This does not mean dissolving individual human agency into an overwhelming mass of socio-structural determination. British citizens are not *compelled* to smoke cigarettes or consume excessive amounts of unhealthy food. But the choices they make are partly determined and conditioned by the circumstances they find themselves in. The distribution of health and illness is, in other words, *socially* determined. This explains why there is a clear social gradient in relation to a large array of health outcomes, despite the apparently 'free' choices individuals are able to make about their own lives.

The micro-level preoccupations of criminological risk factor research are placed in sharp relief against the macro-level focus on social determinants offered by the contributions to this collection of essays. This does not deny the significance of many of the insights gathered from risk factor analysis. But it does present it with the challenge of relating these insights to a broader based consideration of their social determinants. The concrete policy implications would be to direct attention away from identifying and intervening in the lives of 'risky' individuals and towards addressing the socio-structural factors that shape their 'riskiness'.

Second, the perspective offers a more coherent framework for understanding the relative influence of different risk factors in shaping long-term outcomes. For example, in their chapter on ethnic inequalities in health, James Nazroo and David Williams point out that black and minority ethnic (BME) groups have disproportionately poor health outcomes. However, ethnicity is not the determining factor: a 'large body of convincing evidence now supports the possibility that ethnic inequalities in health are largely a consequence of socio-economic differentials'. Ethnicity is not insignificant in a society marked by racism and stereotyping. The economic nonetheless remains determinative (Nazroo and Williams, 2006). Among other things, such an analysis offers an important corrective to the increasingly ubiquitous, sometimes implicitly racist, attempts to find 'cultural' explanations for BME disadvantage.

The contrast with much criminological risk factor research is striking. Consider for instance the following, from Farrington's 2007 essay:

> [D]oes large family size predict offending because of the consequent poor supervision of each child, overcrowded households, poverty, or merely because more antisocial people tend to have more children than others?

> (Farrington, 2007)

The confusion in this extract is twofold. The primary confusion is in assuming that poverty is just another variable, alongside large family size, overcrowded households and poor child supervision. But this clearly is not the case. People do not generally choose to live in overcrowded housing, They do so because they cannot afford

somewhere larger. Low income parents working long hours to make ends meet are less likely to be in a position to give their children the kind of support and attention that comfortably off parents with more leisure time on their hands might be able to. Poverty and inequality play a determinative role in relation to other factors because access to adequate financial resources is fundamental to what makes contemporary life enjoyable, or simply manageable.

This clarifies the related confusion in Farrington's seeking to disentangle cause from effect. Poverty and inequality become the primary causal mechanism that orders and articulates the other factors. The 'anti-social' family would be less likely to be problematic were they living in spacious and decent accommodation and the parents had the time, energy and financial resources to devote to their children's upbringing. The work of Marmot and colleagues, in other words, challenges the researcher and the policy maker to engage in thinking through and articulating a clear theoretical perspective – informed by empirical research – on the forces and structures that shape individual agency, institutional structures and the political process.

Third, and finally, the perspective offered by the authors cited here redefines the focus of study for risk-based research: from a focus on the individual and the risk they pose *to* society to a focus on the socially mediated risks experienced *by* the individual. Individuals face a variety of socially mediated risks: poor nutrition, smoking-related problems, labour market disadvantage, housing problems, and so on. The policy challenge becomes one of seeking to address the underlying socio-structural dysfunctions that determine these outcomes, rather than placing responsibility on the individual to address their level of risk. It is an argument, to quote Armstrong, in favour of 'a redistributive politics rather than a social policy of intervention "to improve the poor"' (Armstrong, 2004).

Concluding remarks

Risk-based approaches to children and young people are overly reliant on a misreading of a research base that itself is limited to a relatively narrow set of questions. The result, unsurprisingly, has been inconclusive policy results and an ongoing widening of the youth justice net.

The implications for young adults in trouble with the law are significant. Many of them will have first come to the attention of government agencies as 'risky' children and young people. Thrown on to the 'early interventions' conveyor belt in their childhood, many will find themselves propelled into wasteful, counterproductive and prolonged interventions into their own lives and those of their families.

Meanwhile the socially mediated risks and vulnerabilities they face and experience in their everyday lives are largely ignored. There is much talk of the risk posed by children and young people to others. There is much less consideration of the risky social arrangements that result in so many children and young people growing into a young adulthood marked by poverty, insecurity and mental distress. These themes will be picked up the third paper in this series.

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