

News

Joe Murphy, Political Editor
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A generation of London babies are doomed to crime or poverty before they are three years old, new research has shown.

They are born into such dysfunctional families that when they go to nursery school their brains are already underdeveloped.

The findings were revealed today by former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith as he published a study containing startling statistics about social breakdown in the capital.

In an unprecedented move, his Social Justice Commission think tank is to team up with the Smith Foundation - the group set up in memory of late Labour leader John Smith and closely linked to Gordon Brown - to investigate the phenomenon further.

"The life outcomes for these children are virtually set in stone by the time they are three," said Mr Duncan Smith who, since losing the party leadership in 2003, has devoted his time to highlighting social problems and possible solutions. Most babies begin development with their parents talking to them or reading aloud, which develops their brains and teaches them to socialise.

The problem begins when babies are ignored, or live in homes where there is anger, shouting or mistreatment.

By nursery age, some are unable to converse properly and have not learned how to share toys or play happily. Only intensive teaching could save them but hard-pressed teachers were unable to break off from the other children.

"Once they are behind their peer group, it is very difficult to rescue them and they are likely to end up involved in crime or drugs," said Mr Duncan Smith. "This gets to the very heart of everything else we have been looking at.

"One lesson is that it costs three times as much to help a teenager who has fallen behind as it would to stop it from falling behind by helping its family at the earliest stage of development."

Today's report, Breakthrough London, also contained an indictment of the poverty tolerated in the capital alongside its wealth. It found that half the children in inner London live below the poverty line - defined in the report as an annual household income of £11,000, or 60 per cent of median income - and that the gulf between rich and poor is widening.

Crime is three times higher in the most dangerous boroughs than in the safest, and unemployment runs at almost 50 per cent in the poorest areas.

The report linked social breakdown to severe pockets of poverty, highlighting that in some parts of the capital six in 10 households are headed by a single parent - 65 per cent above the national average. Only 45 per cent of lone parents in London were in jobs.

The findings will be debated by the leading mayoral candidates at a Social Justice Commission hustings on Wednesday night. Mr Duncan Smith said the mayoral race was a chance to tackle the five main causes of poverty: family breakdown, worklessness, educational failure, addiction and debt.

"London is a tale of two cities," he said. "There will always be some level of disparity between areas in the city, but the current extent is unacceptable."

The report recommends a package of policies to reverse social breakdown.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Success

- London's economy is bigger than Sweden or Switzerland, valued at \$452 billion.
- By 2020 it will be the fourth largest city economy in the world.
- With 12% of the UK population, it contributes 19% of national earnings.
- The Square Mile produces 4% of GDP.
- Take-home pay is 45 per cent more on average.

Failure



Tower Hamlets: among the most deprived areas in England

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- Tower Hamlets, Newham and Hackney are three of England's most deprived areas.
- In Inner London, half of all children are in poverty.
- A baby boy has a life expectancy of 74.9 years if born in Islington and 83.1 years if born in Kensington and Chelsea.
- In Tower Hamlets 47.4 per cent of adults are not in work and a quarter have no qualifications.

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The over-generous welfare system is to blame, not just for financial disincentives but for teaching people that work is an option. Old people would receive a lot more attention from family members if they were still involved in childcare. There are numerous arguments against making people reliant on the State.

- **Mark Curtis, London**

Yet they all run around in nike shoes...poverty? Don't make me laugh, take some responsibility.

- **Daveb, London**

With nearly 700,000 job vacancies in the country, nearly half of the unemployed have no excuse not to work other than the benefits system is too generous.

And while we feed and house these people whose idea of being poor is that they only have three children and two plasma TVs, the honest hard working population are being taxed to the point where they can no longer afford the mortgages on their houses.

- **Graham, Reading, England**

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