

The human tragedies behind the credit crunch

Bafta-winning documentary-maker **Brian Woods** explains his new film about debt, *Bust*

Bust, which airs tomorrow night on BBC1, is a film that follows the emotional journey of being in debt. Last year average household debt in the UK rose to over £60,000, the highest it's ever been, but the human cost is rarely covered in the media. The recession isn't only hitting banks and multi-nationals; it's having a profound emotional impact on individuals and families.

Unfortunately though, it's a problem no one wants to talk about. So the first problem we faced was finding people willing to take part. Nowadays, people appear happy to parade just about anything on television – their addictions, their bizarre medical conditions – with the exception of their financial problems. It was extraordinarily difficult to find families brave enough to overcome the acute embarrassment they felt about being in debt. We spoke to hundreds, and even those who agreed to participate still had reservations.

Our second challenge was that debt isn't a naturally dramatic subject. In 2006 I made a Bafta-winning documentary called *Evicted* about families going through homelessness. The evictions gave the film a natural and dramatic storyline. Debt is a much harder subject to film because not much happens outwardly, it's all about what is going on inside people's heads.

In the end we filmed five families from December 2007 to December 2008, as the financial markets went into meltdown, and banks went to the wall. During editing we then selected three who best represented the problem. One of the families we follow is Tracey, 42, Melvyn, 57, and their three children. They are a very normal family who bought their Derby council house in 2004, which at the time made sound financial sense. Both Tracey, a restaurant manager, and Melvyn, a mechanic, had jobs, and at the time their mortgage repayments were significantly less than the rent they had previously been paying.

But when Melvyn had to give up his job because their son fell ill, the family had no choice but to pay the bills on their credit cards. They then took out a consolidation loan, secured against the



VICTIMS OF CIRCUMSTANCE? Tracey, Melvyn and their three children

house, to pay off those bills – again something that made financial sense at the time because the interest rate was lower than they were paying the credit card companies. But when interest rates surged in late 2007 and early 2008 they really ran into problems.

Last week, Tracey and Melvyn's home was finally repossessed. In the nine months leading up to that moment we've watched them go through hell. Over the course of filming they were slowly crushed by the pressure of the debt

declare themselves bankrupt.

Although bankruptcy offers a way out, it is still an extremely difficult, complicated and stressful process.

I filmed Maria as she tried to fill in her bankruptcy forms. She kept saying to me, "I just don't understand this. Can you look at it?" Maria's a very intelligent woman, but between us we still struggled to make sense of the arcane legalese in which both the forms and the guidance notes are drafted.

Of course, bankruptcy shouldn't be

“Over the course of filming the family was slowly crushed by the debt hanging over them”

hanging over them, and their doomed attempts to insulate their children from that stress. When we started filming with them last spring, both were outgoing and, though they knew they had problems, hopeful that they would find their way through. Today the family is homeless, and both Tracey and Melvyn are suffering from depression.

The film's other two subjects are Maria, 45, a social worker, and Michael, 64, a retired chef. Both were offered credit which at the time they could comfortably afford, but the combination of the credit crunch and unforeseen changes in their own circumstances led them to conclude, in the course of the film, that their only option was to

easy – you shouldn't just be able to run away from responsibilities. But does it need to be this hard?

If you have money worries, then this is a film I urge you to watch. The key message is that no matter how embarrassing it is, getting good advice and clear guidance early on is key.

Indeed, the reason why all the families in *Bust* ultimately agreed to take part was altruism. All three decided: if other people can learn from our horrible experiences, and can avoid going through what we have, then it will be worth overcoming our embarrassment.

* *Bust* is on tomorrow on BBC1 at 10.35pm; N Ireland, 11.00pm