



## **A study of the English national datasets for children's social care**

### **Background:**

For many years, local authorities have measured the activity and outcomes of children's social care services for use in internal audits as well as external inspections. Summary statistics on a range of performance indicators are reported on an annual basis to the Department for Education.

### **Aim:**

Using publicly available datasets, the study aimed to explore national trends in intervention rates, variations between local authorities, the effect of local characteristics such as deprivation, and the connection between quality indicators and Ofsted ratings.

### **Method:**

Performance indicators for all English local authorities from 2001-14 were combined into a single dataset. Statistical analysis was undertaken to explore trends and correlations.

### **Findings:**

1. Local authorities have increasingly used child protection interventions to address demand for child welfare services, particularly since the 'Baby P' crisis of 2008.
2. Local authorities in more deprived areas experienced higher overall levels of demand. They tended to screen out more referrals, close down cases more quickly, and were less likely to work longer term with families. They also had higher rates of re-referrals (within 12 months), which are a negative outcomes measure.
3. Quality measures mainly focused on the timeliness of work processes, but these did not seem to affect outcomes in the form of re-referral rates.
4. A small number of indicators were able to predict an inadequate Ofsted rating in 2012 and 2013: timeliness of initial assessments, rates of re-referrals, and agency workers.
5. Changes in performance measures in the year following an inadequate Ofsted rating seemed to suggest greater use of child protection plans and investigations compared with similarly performing local authorities.

### **Implications**

1. The increasing focus on child protection is a particular problem for local authorities in areas of high deprivation, which are more reliant on non-statutory agencies to help manage demand.
2. Local authorities in more affluent areas might have a greater tendency to use protective rather than preventative measures to work with families.
3. Overall pressure on frontline services may partly be down to their 'filter-and-funnel' design, which means some families experience several assessments and even multiple case closures before their needs are addressed.
4. Existing quality indicators tend to measure the timeliness of completing work processes, but these seem to have little bearing on outcomes.
5. The Ofsted inspection process, with high numbers of local authorities rated inadequate, may be exacerbating the shift towards protective interventions in the sector.

### **Conclusion**

Existing performance indicators are insufficiently focused on outcomes and may be contributing to institutional anxiety about risk in children's social care. Different measures are needed to refocus services on what end-users want them to achieve.

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