

Identifying and understanding the link between system conditions and welfare inequalities in children's social care services

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The Nuffield Foundation has awarded a research grant of £263,652 to the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education at Kingston University and St Georges, University of London, in order to identify and understand the link between system conditions and welfare inequalities in children's social care services. The two year project will be led by Dr Rick Hood, Kingston and St Georges, and Professor Paul Bywaters, University of Huddersfield.

Introduction

Children's social care includes a range of local government services that promote and safeguard the welfare of children. Government statistics show that over the last fifteen years local authorities in England are doing more and more child protection work. Contrary to most people's assumption, this is not primarily due to an increase in referrals. While referral rates can vary considerably from one year to the next, they have not risen substantially over the longer term. Referrals to children's social care in 2016-17 were only 7% higher than in 2001-02. Over the same period, rates of child protection investigations more than doubled from 31 to 65 per 10,000 per 0-17 children, rates of child protection plans increased by 87%, and rates of care orders increased by 37%. Although thresholds are not directly comparable, the figures suggest that children who are referred into the system are much more likely to be made subject to a child protection plan than fifteen years ago¹.

These changes mainly affect families living in deprived areas. A child from a deprived neighbourhood is much more likely to be in care, or subject to a child protection plan, than a child from an affluent neighbourhood. The usual reason given for this is that demand for services is higher in those areas. While child abuse and neglect are rare among poor families, they are more likely to occur than among rich families. However, recent research has shown that this is not the whole story. Research has shown that inequalities in provision exist that are linked not only to deprivation but also to other factors shaping the way services are delivered.

Welfare inequalities matter because they suggest that a child's chances of being subject to a protection plan, or being taken into care, is higher or lower simply by virtue of living in one place and not another. This is obviously unfair. While the causes are unclear, they are most likely linked to the way the system works, rather than being the result of human error or bad practice. The problem is that we do not know enough about what goes on in the system. Deprivation is not the only factor influencing the provision of services. Other factors are important too, such as expenditure, caseloads, workforce characteristics, Ofsted inspections, and changes in legislation. When there is a crisis in confidence in the system, as happened after the 'Baby P' scandal of 2008, it also affects what referrals are made and what is done with them. These factors are known as 'system conditions', because they shape how the system works in particular areas at particular times. Our study aims to explore these system conditions, and find out how they might contribute to welfare inequalities.

Aim

This two-year study aims to establish whether and how system conditions in the children's social care are contributing to welfare inequalities and indicate the kind of system change needed in order to reduce those inequalities.

¹ Source: Department of Education statistics: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-children-in-need>

Objectives

- To identify the characteristics of local authorities, neighbourhoods, and individuals that are associated with particular pathways of intervention for children receiving children's social care services.
- To understand from the perspective of practitioners and managers why there might be different patterns of demand and provision in their own services and in the sector as a whole.
- To use the empirical findings to understand the link between system conditions and welfare inequalities in children's social care.
- To engage with professionals, policy makers, politicians and the public in order to disseminate the study's findings and promote a holistic understanding of performance that takes into account the social context of intervention.

System conditions refer to the underlying factors that shape the way services are organised and delivered. They can affect performance in services and may reflect attitudes and assumptions about how services should be organised and managed.

Child welfare inequalities occur when children and/or their parents face unequal chances, experiences or outcomes of involvement with child welfare services that are systematically associated with structural social dis/advantage and are unjust and avoidable.

Methods

The research will use a convergent mixed methods design in order to explore a range of factors in the organisational and institutional context of statutory children's social care in England and their potential link to welfare inequalities. There will be three main strands of data collection and analysis.

1. Quantitative analysis of national data returns for children's social care in all English local authorities. This includes analysis of performance indicators, Ofsted ratings, and contextual variables (e.g. deprivation rates, ethnicity, workforce data). The aim is to find out whether the correlations identified in an earlier study, covering the five year period 2009-13, have continued in the subsequent three years (2013-16), or whether new patterns have emerged.
2. Quantitative analysis of case-level data on all children who have been referred to children's social care services in six local authorities over a three-year period. This will follow children through the social care system over the three years and will enable associations between system variables, deprivation indicators, intervention pathways and outcomes for children in each of the local authorities.
3. Qualitative interviews with approximately 30 managers, practitioners and senior administrators, on two occasions in each of the six local authorities (60 interviews) followed by two focus groups. These aim to understand their views about the key factors affecting provision of services in their area.

Outcomes

We want to introduce a consideration of system conditions, and their potential effect on welfare inequalities, into current policy debates on innovation and the transformation of children's services. The key outcome will be to establish how system conditions in children's social care are contributing to welfare inequalities and indicate the kind of system change needed in order to reduce those inequalities.

Impact

We aim to maximise the impact of the study by disseminating throughout the course of the two-year project to key stakeholders including the Department for Education and the Department for Communities and Local Government, as well as Ofsted, the main regulator for children's social care, and the Local Government Association, influential think tanks, voluntary sector organisations and to social work practitioners, managers and academics. On the website we will be publishing regular updates and a final report (which will be sent to the Association of Directors of Children's Services and participating local authorities) and will provide links to articles we write for academic journals, blogs and articles in the professional press. We will also be hosting a conference at the end of the project and will attend national and international conferences to disseminate the findings of the research.

Ethical approval

This research has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee within the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, Kingston University and St Georges, University of London. The study has also received approval from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (reference RGE180112).

Advisory group and stakeholders

An expert Advisory Group has been recruited from across the UK. The group will support engagement with national governments and other key players, advise on the interpretation of emerging findings and assist the impact strategy. A wide group of stakeholders including governmental and non-governmental organisations, professional groups and service users will be kept informed and consulted throughout to maximise the impact on policy and practice.

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Project webpage:

