

System conditions and inequalities in children's social care

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The institutional context and organisational structure of children's social care is contributing to systematic inequalities in provision. Addressing these issues will require policymakers to pay more attention to the link between neglect and poverty, and agencies to develop more flexible and community-oriented types of provision.

This research examined patterns of demand for children's social care services in England, using national data from the Department for Education, Cafcass and the Office for National Statistics, before undertaking an in-depth study of six local authorities. Quantitative analysis of child-level data and qualitative interviews with practitioners and managers were combined in order to explore the link between welfare inequalities and 'system conditions' – underlying factors that shape the way services are organised and delivered.

Key findings

- Children's social care is undergoing a shift to late intervention, with more money spent on child protection and public care while preventive services are cut or closed down.
- More deprived local authorities had higher demand and experienced greater financial pressures, leading services to screen more cases out, work with families for shorter periods, and spend less per child in need.
- There were significant differences in provision for children depending on their gender, age, ethnicity and socio-economic status.

- Demand analysis provided evidence for a more nuanced way of understanding risk to children; the so-called 'toxic trio' of parental substance misuse, mental health problems, and domestic abuse was often combined with other factors, including neglect, in the cases most likely to receive a protective intervention.
- More deprived children were more likely to receive an intervention than less deprived children and this 'social gradient' was particularly steep for younger children, White British children and neglect cases.
- In a quarter of child protection plans for neglect, the original social work assessment had not identified neglect as a concern.
- Local authorities are over-reliant on thresholds to manage demand; alternative approaches are needed to tackle safeguarding problems in the community.

Overview

The research set out to identify system conditions in children's social care services and examine their link to welfare inequalities. An analysis of national datasets showed that local authorities with high levels of demand tend to do more screening and rationing than local authorities with low demand. This effect seems to have been exacerbated by austerity policies because high demand local authorities tend to have higher levels of deprivation and government cuts have fallen disproportionately on more deprived areas. More rationing was also associated with lower workforce stability.

In-depth investigation of intervention pathways, demand typologies and system conditions in six English local authorities showed significant differences in provision for children depending on their gender, age, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Demand analysis identified seven common classes of demand across all the LAs and raised doubts about the ‘toxic trio’ as a way of thinking about risk to children. The analysis also showed that categories of child protection plans were not always aligned with the needs identified in the original social work assessment. More deprived children were more likely to receive an intervention than less deprived children and this ‘social gradient’ was particularly steep for cases of neglect, as well as for younger children and White British children.

Underlying these systematic differences is a threshold-based system designed to assess and manage children’s needs on a case-by-case basis. It largely de-contextualises children from their social context, allowing welfare inequalities to emerge from what seem to be reasonable judgements and decisions at the sharp end of practice. However, local authorities are adopting a different approach to problems such as child sexual exploitation and gangs, for which standard child protection procedures are seen as ineffective. Such issues require strategic interventions that account for social context and are developed jointly with other agencies. A similar approach could help to reduce welfare inequalities in mainstream services, creating a more flexible system with less reliance on demand management via thresholds and more emphasis on problem-solving in (and with) communities.

Key Recommendations

The full report contains a number of recommendations for policy and practice. In summary:

- **There is an imbalance in the resources that local authorities have to meet demand for child welfare services, which is contributing to the tendency for less deprived local authorities to be more interventionist.** Current inequities in the funding formula should be addressed so that resources for the most deprived local authorities are commensurate with the needs and hardships faced by their communities.
- **Children’s social care needs to be rebalanced from its unsustainable emphasis on high-cost late intervention.** This will require a lot more investment in preventive services. As Early Help has become increasingly focused on assessment, complex needs, and targeted casework, the main priority for investment should be the rebuilding of capacity and resources in communities.
- **Services are currently designed around multiple tiers of triage and assessment, which contribute to welfare inequalities because they emphasis screening and rationing and de-contextualise children from their social circumstances.** Alternative designs are needed that focus on strategic concerns, or problem areas, using demand analysis and local knowledge of safeguarding issues in local communities. Specialist functions can be developed around these strategic concerns, to complement the coordination of work around statutory thresholds.

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