

Studying the outcomes of children's social care provision for different types of demand

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The Nuffield Foundation has awarded a research grant of £184,129 to Kingston University, 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 Professor Rick Hood at Kingston University, in collaboration with the National Children's Bureau, Ofsted, and the University of Sheffield.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen an increase in the needs of, and risks to, vulnerable children. Yet children's social care (CSC) services were overstretched even before the pandemic, with a large rise in protective interventions and admissions to care over the past decade. There are steep inequalities in the provision of these services, with children from the poorest neighbourhoods over 10 times more likely to be taken into care than children from the most affluent neighbourhoods. These inequalities are difficult to reduce while council budgets are under huge strain and children's services are largely focused on dealing with referrals and assessing risk for individual children and families. As policymakers seek to turn round a vicious circle of rationing and spiraling demand, there is an urgent need for research into the outcomes of statutory provision for different groups of children. However, limitations in data and methodology means that little is known about the influence of socio-economic inequality on outcomes for children who have received CSC services, including educational attainment, nor about how children's presenting needs and longitudinal pathways of intervention influence those outcomes.

In a programme of work funded by the Nuffield Foundation, a research team at Kingston University identified the main system conditions driving inequalities in CSC provision. Quantitative findings from this study were then validated with an all-England dataset in collaboration with Ofsted, the inspectorate for CSC. This work has provided a unique insight into patterns of demand and provision, which combines the socio-economic drivers of referral to statutory services with child characteristics, the factors identified in social work assessments, and longitudinal pathways of intervention including child protection plans and episodes of care. The project showed the extent to which services are struggling to understand and deal with the social context of demand.

The study outlined here will build on this existing work into CSC systems and inequalities. It will incorporate an understanding of system conditions into an investigation of intervention pathways and outcomes. The project will conduct detailed analysis of the variety of demand for services and the local context of provision. Coming at a time when social and economic inequalities have not only contributed to the inequitable impact from Covid-19, but may also be hampering efforts to contain its spread, the project will also examine whether child welfare inequalities have been further exacerbated by the pandemic. It will achieve policy impact via close collaboration with Ofsted and the Department for Education and through its links with local authority (LA) partners and third sector organisations. The findings from the study will contribute to strategic planning, service design, and innovation in the sector.

Aim

The aim of this two-year study is to use national administrative datasets to investigate the outcomes of children's social care (CSC) provision for different types of demand, and to understand the role of child characteristics and local authority (LA) context in shaping those outcomes.

Objectives

- To identify and profile the underlying types of demand for CSC services in England
- To explore the intermediate outcomes of provision.
- To explore the longitudinal outcomes of provision, differentiated by demand type and intermediate outcomes.

Methods

The research is designed as a quantitative analysis of administrative datasets in children's social care and education. The project will be led by researchers based at Kingston University, who will carry out the work in collaboration with participation and policy experts from the NCB, and with support from the Ofsted children's social care data team, the Department for Education's children's social care research and analysis team. There will be three main strands to the analysis.

1. To achieve the first research objective, Latent Class Analysis (LCA) will be used to identify mutually exclusive classes of demand for all children who received a statutory social work assessment between 2015-2020, based on the factors identified at assessment. There will be an additional piece of analysis comparing patterns in these five years with the children who came to the attention of services in 2020/21, i.e. during the first year of the pandemic.
2. To achieve the second research objective, survival analysis using Cox regression models will be carried out to investigate the rate and speed with which certain types of episodes are re-referred. The timing of events will highlight critical periods of risk, including cases of substantiated abuse and neglect, identify particular groups where earlier resolution of problems might have been possible, and explore the social and geographical determinants for multiple periods of intervention.
3. To achieve the third research objective, a link will be made between the CSC datasets and educational attainment data from the National Pupil Database. Multiple regression analysis will be carried out to show how attainment outcomes vary at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. The analysis will be carried out in several stages, adjusting for socioeconomic and geographical determinants. The results will show where the attainment gaps are widest, and provide an evidence-base to help services better meet the educational needs for children who are particularly disadvantaged and who are identified as having specific needs and vulnerabilities.

Outcomes

- The study's intended outcomes are to:
- Identify, for the first time, the relationship between child characteristics, presenting needs, CSC intervention, and the outcomes of a child welfare intervention.
- Contribute to the evidence base on what works for whom in children's social care so as to promote holistic approaches to planning services for and with families and communities.
- Show evidence of initial impact of the pandemic on inequalities

- Suggest policies, practices and service designs to reduce inequalities in outcomes

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 and will provide links to articles we write for academic journals, blogs and articles in the professional press. We will also be hosting an online 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 been given provisional approval (subject to the necessary information governance procedures being satisfactorily completed) by Ofsted and the Department for Education.

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.

For further information please contact:

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