



Identifying and understanding inequalities in child welfare interventions: comparative studies in four UK countries. A two year research project funded by the Nuffield Foundation

Background

This project is a major study of inequalities in child welfare intervention rates within and between the four UK countries. The underlying intention is to contribute to a fundamental shift in the evidence base for child welfare policy and practice in the UK and internationally, modelled on the long term impact that the Black Report (DHSS 1980) had on health policy. The purpose is to re-frame child welfare as a site of social inequality; to focus more attention on populations, social structures and welfare systems and less on individual risk, parenting and professional behaviours. It is a response to the current crisis in children's services by providing analysis that will help re-shape the direction and purpose of child welfare services.

Since 2000, the central focus of research on child welfare services in the UK has been on improving the identification, assessment and management of children at risk and outcomes for children in out of home care. Some previous research has examined inequalities in intervention rates between local authorities (Oliver et al., 2001; Dickens et al., 2007, Owen and Statham, 2009) but has focused on how systems work rather than fundamental causes (Phelan et al., 2010). Little of this work drew on the extensive body of theory, evidence and methodologies available from the fields of inequalities in health or education, which opens up the potential for inter-disciplinary conversations and inter-professional alliances. None of the recently stated DfE research priorities for child protection and looked after children include the central subjects of this proposal: primary and secondary prevention, the causes of inequalities in intervention rates or the roles of deprivation and ethnicity.

The proposal directly follows a recent study of 10% of looked after children (LAC) and children on child protection plans (CPP) in England, led by Professor Paul Bywaters, at Coventry University (for more details see www.coventry.ac.uk/child-welfare-inequalities).

The key findings of this Coventry pilot study were:

- **Very large inequalities** in a child's chances of being CPP or LAC between and within local authorities (LAs) are strongly statistically related to measures of area-level deprivation. A child in the most deprived decile of neighbourhoods nationally had an 11 times greater chance of being CPP and 12 times greater chance of being LAC than a child living in the most affluent decile.
- **A social gradient in child welfare intervention rates** across society. Each step increase in neighbourhood deprivation correlated with an increase in intervention rates.

- **Large ethnic inequalities.** After controlling for deprivation, Black children were less likely than White children to be LAC, contrary to previous reports. White children were up to 6 times more likely than Asian children to be LAC or on a CPP.
- **An ‘inverse intervention law’.** While a child’s chances of being CPP or LAC increase substantially with a LA’s overall level of deprivation, for any given level of deprivation, rates of intervention were substantially higher in more affluent LAs.
- **Misleading Statistics.** Unless controlled for population, deprivation and ethnicity, variations in LA overall intervention rates are misleading.

Aim

The aim of the two year project is: to establish child welfare inequalities as a core concept in policy making, practice and research in the UK and internationally.

Objectives

- Identify the relationship of deprivation, policy and other factors to inequalities in key child welfare intervention rates through separate and comparative studies in the four UK countries.
- Develop and begin to test a theoretical framework for understanding the causes of inequalities in child welfare intervention rates, focusing in particular on the inverse intervention law.
- Establish the necessary empirical, theoretical and methodological foundations for new directions in research, policy and practice to reduce avoidable child welfare inequalities.
- Build research capacity for the study of child welfare inequalities
- Influence the role and direction of child welfare services in the UK, by promoting evidence-informed discussion of child welfare inequalities by professionals, policy makers, politicians and the public.

Methods

The research will replicate and extend the Coventry pilot findings, which were based exclusively on local authorities (LAs) in the English West Midlands, by studies of data on the proportion of children on child protection plans and looked after children within each of the four UK countries, followed by a comparative cross-country analysis. Explanations for aspects of the findings of this two stage quantitative project will be developed through mixed methods case studies with a sub-group of LAs in England and Scotland, concentrating in particular on the ‘inverse intervention law’.

These studies are designed to build the methodological, empirical and theoretical foundations for developing the study of child welfare inequalities internationally, defined as “unequal chances, experiences and outcomes of child welfare that are systematically associated with social advantage/disadvantage” (Bywaters, 2013). The project also aims to build capacity and capability in child welfare research, especially in quantitative methods, a current weakness.

Research Team and Advisory Group

The research team is led by senior members of universities in the four countries: Professors Bywaters (Coventry), Daniel (Stirling), Featherstone (Open), Morris (Nottingham) and

Scourfield (Cardiff) and Drs. Bunting (Queen's Belfast) and Brady (Coventry). A central priority of the project, led by Prof. Featherstone, will be on engaging with key audiences and maximising impact.

An Advisory Group, chaired by Professor Sir Harry Burns, is being recruited to support the project. The Group will support the research team's engagement with national governments and other key stakeholders, advise on the interpretation of emerging findings and support the communication strategy. Members of the Advisory Group will be chosen, in particular, for their ability to help the research team influence policy, political and public debates about future directions in child welfare.

A wider group of stakeholders including governmental and non-governmental organisations, professional groups and service users will also be engaged to support the development of the project and its impact on policy and practice. Stakeholders will be kept in touch with the development of the project, and its findings and their expertise will be sought for advice, discussion of emerging issues and dissemination.

The project begins in April 2015 and will report in 2017.

The project has a page on the Coventry University website:

<http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2014/child-welfare-inequality-uk/>

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Paul Bywaters, Professor of Social Work, Coventry University, January 2015

Contact: p.bywaters@coventry.ac.uk