

## Children's social care services face increasing challenges in dealing with complex needs and a more evidence-based picture of need can be valuable.

*Research Title: Studying the outcomes of children's social care provision for different types of demand.*

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### Headline

This briefing reports on groundbreaking new research into children's social care services. Detailed analysis of national administrative data by researchers based at Kingston University shows that children's needs have become more complex over the past decade, with a detrimental effect on outcomes, particularly for older children at risk of neglect and extra-familial harm. Such challenges point to the need for substantial investment in preventative and specialist services to avoid further escalation of problems in the coming years.

### Research Overview

There are wide disparities in outcomes among children receiving children's social care (CSC) services, contributing to the already large inequalities between children who receive CSC services and those who do not. The type and quality of provision affects the extent of such differences, as do children's characteristics, their assessed needs, and the institutional and organisational context. This study set out to explore the complexity of these interconnections, using in-depth analysis of social work assessments to generate categories of demand.

Demand categories refer to the combination of problems and concerns that lead to children coming into contact with social care services. Sometimes there is a clear need for support in a particular area, such as the child's mental health, or an overriding safeguarding concern, such as domestic violence or sexual abuse. However, most child and family assessments record multiple risk factors. Complex needs are more prevalent in cases leading to statutory interventions such as child protection (CP) plans.

The study set out to identify categories of demand based on the factors identified in social work assessments and compare the outcomes of provision for children in different categories. Quantitative analysis was carried out of anonymised national administrative data for all local authorities in England between 2014-21, including 3.6 million assessments with recorded factors. These were linked to data from the national schools census in order to examine children's educational outcomes after receiving services.

## Key findings

### 1. Children had increasingly complex needs and three in every five cases was re-referred.

- The needs of children and families as identified in children's social care assessments across all local authorities in England fell into 12 consistent categories of demand (types of needs).
  - Single-factor domestic abuse and violence (DAV) was found to be the most prevalent category of demand, accounting for a fifth of all cases.
  - A combination of concerns about parental mental health and concerns about either alcohol or drug misuse was the second most prevalent form of demand.
- The overall profile of cases became more complex from 2014-21, with a disproportionate rise in child mental health problems, extra-familial harm, and complexities around parental mental health.
- Average rates of re-referral were 30% over 12 months and 59% over six years. For some categories of demand, these rates were significantly higher. This was also the case for repeat CP plans and re-entry to care.
- Children in more complex categories of need were more likely to be re-referred and to have a repeat CP plan.

#### *Implications:*

Services need to understand the variety of demand and require sufficient resources to address this variety. Otherwise many children will not receive the right kind of help early enough and will return into the system when they are older and their problems are more entrenched.

### 2. What happened after an assessment was affected by a combination of children's needs and characteristics.

- The likelihood of an assessment leading to a CP plan or episode of care depended on a number of factors, including the child's age and ethnicity as well as their category of need. For example:
  - Domestic violence and abuse was much more likely to be met with a protective intervention if assessed alongside other risk factors, particularly if these included concerns about neglect.
  - Children in the 'risks outside the home' category were disproportionately likely to be older, male and/or Black, less likely to receive a CP plan, but more likely to be accommodated in care, compared to the average child assessed by CSC.
  - Children assessed with concerns about their disability were among the least likely to be subject to a CP plan or an episode of care, but if they did reach a threshold of concern they were much more likely to have multiple episodes of care, compared to children in other categories of need.

#### *Implications:*

Findings support a differentiated response to safeguarding concerns about domestic abuse, which often involve children and families who are multiply disadvantaged. Assessment of risks outside

the home should take a more holistic view of vulnerability and need. Improved permanency planning and support for disabled children exiting care might help to reduce re-entry rates.

### **3. Educational outcomes are affected by the type of social care involvement and its interaction with SEND provision.**

- Educational attainment and rates of exclusion became progressively worse for children at higher thresholds of children's social care involvement: children in need (CIN), children on CP plans, and children in care. For example:
  - Average KS4 scores for CIN were 25% lower than those for children never referred to CSC, while scores for children in care were 60% lower.
  - CIN were three and half times more likely to be excluded during their final year at school than children never referred to CSC, while children on CP plans were four and half times more likely to be excluded.
- Children with multiple episodes of CSC involvement had significantly worse educational outcomes than children who had just one episode.
- The attainment gap between children receiving SEND provision and those with no SEND provision became wider for children with SEND who also had CSC involvement.
- However, the exclusions gap between children with and without SEND provision, which applies particularly to children with behavioural difficulties, became narrower for children with both SEND and CSC involvement.

#### *Implications:*

CSC involvement was associated with a lower exclusion gap but a higher attainment gap for children with SEND provision. The former could reflect the contribution of CSC to a more holistic understanding of children's needs and enhanced support for children at risk of disciplinary exclusion. It could also be due to higher rates of behavioural difficulties among children without SEND who come into contact with CSC services. The increased attainment gap suggests that children's services have found the combination of safeguarding concerns and learning difficulties/disabilities challenging to address in the current context.

### **4. Services tended to respond more effectively to concerns about physical and sexual abuse than to concerns about neglect and complex needs.**

- Children whose assessments identified concerns solely about physical abuse or sexual abuse were less likely to receive a CP plan or episode of care, less likely to be re-referred, and less likely to be excluded from school, compared to children in most other categories of need.
- Concerns about abuse and neglect at the assessment stage did not necessarily lead to a protective intervention. Assessments were most likely to lead to a CP plan or episode of care when neglect was found in combination with other risk factors.
- Outcomes for neglect and categories of complex needs involving neglect, especially older children placed on CP plans for neglect, tended to be worse than for most other types of demand.

### *Implications:*

The findings on physical and sexual abuse refer only to children receiving assessments and are a comparison with children experiencing neglect and other complex needs. Surveys and independent inquiries suggest that child welfare services often do not identify or respond effectively to physical and sexual abuse. Nonetheless, neglect cases may present additional challenges for good practice, e.g. timely decision-making, clear communication of concerns, and a solution-focused approach to safety. This is a potential area for future comparative research.

## Policy recommendations

### 1. Central Government support

- a. The CSC outcomes framework and dashboard should encourage the use of demand analysis to understand the relationship between outcome indicators and the needs that CSC services are trying to address.
- b. Funding arrangements should be as flexible as possible to allow CSC services to plan ahead, respond flexibly to local needs, and develop services to reduce the currently high levels of repeat involvement.
- c. Early intervention and prevention support will work best alongside social policies that improve the financial and socio-economic circumstances of families.
- d. A sustained policy focus on youth services and child and adolescent mental health is needed to prevent a further rise in numbers of young people with complex needs.
- e. There should be a sector-wide recommendation to avoid the use of the term “toxic trio”, pointing to demand categories as a more evidence-based way of describing complex needs.
- f. Training for children’s practitioners should include greater recognition of the complex links between domestic abuse and social inequality, between early childhood adversity and extra-familial harm, and the evidence for racial and ethnic disparities in assessment.
- g. Explore the role that virtual school heads (currently working with children in and adopted from care) could play to support improved outcomes amongst particular groups of children on the edge of care. Particular focus should be given to the profile and needs of older children in the higher risk categories.

### 2. Local systems

- a. Local authorities could undertake their own demand analysis in order to inform strategic decisions and the design of local children’s services, to include a summary of complex needs, the level of risk being managed at different thresholds, identification of key problem areas, and the resources needed to address strategic concerns.
- b. Local authorities in England can apply the analysis set out in this study to their own assessments data, using the template and analysis code available on the project website.
- c. The rising proportion of complex needs in relation to older children and adolescents points to the need to refund youth and community services, and to reinforce the role of children’s social care in local violence reduction units.