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## Scoping review to draw together data on child injury and safeguarding and to compare the position of England with that in other countries

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Emily R. Munro, Rebecca Brown, Joe Sempik and Harriet Ward with Charlie Owen, Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Statistical data on the proportion of children identified as likely to suffer significant harm, cases of substantiated abuse and neglect and the number placed in public care vary between regions and countries, as do placement types and service responses. This scoping review explored what data are published internationally on safeguarding children from physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and exposure to intimate partner violence and from child death and injury and investigated the comparability of the data between countries. In addition to England, six countries were selected for in-depth examination: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway and the USA. Comparing the situation in England with that elsewhere and exploring similarities and differences in the approaches adopted to safeguard children from harm allows current policy and practice to be benchmarked against others.

### KEY FINDINGS

- International organisations, including the World Health Organisation and UNICEF, collate and publish datasets to facilitate comparison of child deaths due to negligence, maltreatment or physical assault in different countries. However, international datasets to facilitate cross-national comparison of the prevalence of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect in the developed world are not available.
- Data collected at a national level in different countries may be valuable to aid exploration of similarities and differences in safeguarding policy and practice in different countries, although caution is needed to avoid misinterpretation of the data. Consideration needs to be given to the differences in historical, social,

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<sup>1</sup> The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre is a partnership between the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) and other centres at the Institute of Education, the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University and the Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU) at the University of Kent.

cultural, political and economic context that influence developments in child welfare, as well as variations in definitions of key terms and concepts and in the availability, reliability and comparability of different datasets.

- Common operational definitions for different forms of abuse assist in making meaningful cross-national comparisons. There is greater international consensus regarding definitions of physical abuse and sexual abuse than there is in respect of emotional abuse, neglect and witnessing intimate partner violence.
- Countries with strong centralised systems, such as England and Norway, are more readily able to gather reliable national datasets than those operating different legislative frameworks and administrative systems (Australia, Canada and the USA).
- Different approaches to safeguarding children have a substantial impact on the manner in which maltreatment is identified, the services offered and consequently on the numbers of children identified at each stage of the process. It is easy to confuse differences which have arisen through policy and legislative frameworks with genuine differences in the prevalence of abuse and the effectiveness of services.
- Gilbert and colleagues (2009) distinguish between a *child and family welfare approach* and a *child safety approach*. A *child and family welfare approach* operates in most Western European countries, including England, Norway, Denmark and Finland. This is essentially a needs based approach, in which child protection investigations are seen as part of a continuum of services for children in need and their families, and agencies respond to allegations of maltreatment alongside referrals for family support services for children who may be in need but not likely to suffer significant harm. A *child safety approach* operates in the USA, Canada and some Australian states. In this model, child protection investigations are seen as distinct from the provision of child welfare services for those with lower levels of need.
- A core set of data items were generally collected by sample countries, including data on children's characteristics, type of abuse (with the exception of Finland and Denmark), numbers referred and the source of referrals<sup>2</sup>, numbers assessed, receiving services and looked after (by region). Minimal data were available of the characteristics of families involved with children's services or on factors affecting parenting capacity, although such data may be insightful to explore similarities and differences in subsequent service responses.

## BACKGROUND

In 2007, an *Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries* (UNICEF, 2007) highlighted that the lack of common definitions and inconsistencies between country's reporting and classification of child abuse make international comparisons challenging (p.7). The purpose of this study was to explore what data are routinely collected by different countries and how comparable these datasets are in order to

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<sup>2</sup> England's statistical returns do not include this as a data item

determine the extent to which it is possible to make meaningful comparisons of existing data on child death, injury and safeguarding.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The overarching aim of the study was to scope the existing international data on safeguarding children from physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and exposure to intimate partner violence and from child death and intentional injury. The objective was to consider how different institutional and cultural approaches to safeguarding children and different forms of provision and support may influence trends in the incidence and nature of abuse and neglect and similarities and differences in the responses of public authorities.

### **Research Questions**

The study focused on ascertaining the **availability** of data on preventable child death and intentional injury and safeguarding; and identification of a core set of variables to facilitate exploration of the **comparability** of these data. The following questions have been investigated:

#### ***Availability of data***

What official statistics on intentional child injury and safeguarding are routinely collected by countries and how frequently is information collected? Is there a core set of variables that most countries tend to include in their statistical returns?

#### ***Comparability of data***

What conceptual and definitional issues are encountered and need to be resolved to facilitate meaningful cross-national comparison of official statistics on child injury and safeguarding?

Preliminary work was also undertaken to facilitate:

#### ***Interpretation of data***

What do official statistics tell us about incidence of preventable child death, injury, abuse and neglect in England and how do these figures compare with other developed countries?

## **METHODS**

Initially, the websites of international organisations were searched to ascertain **which variables relating to child mortality and welfare are collated by international organisations** to assist in comparing similarities and differences between countries. To identify seven countries for in-depth exploration the OECD countries were ranked based on the amount of data they submitted for international publications on child mortality. The criteria below were therefore adopted to assist with country selection:

- The countries have provided data for international comparison for key mortality variables
- Countries in the developed world
- A wide geographical spread.

Work was then undertaken to identify **what child welfare data were collected and published nationally in each country**. The following **seven countries were selected for further scrutiny because they routinely collect and publish national data on a wide range of child welfare variables: Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, Norway and the USA**. Numerical data were then extracted for each of the selected countries either from published online datasets or from annual reports. To assist with understanding similarities and differences in child welfare systems and their implications, as well as variations in language and terminology on the comparability of data, telephone interviews were undertaken with key experts in each country. These explored: the type and quality of data collected, the rationale for its collection and challenges of within country and/or making cross-national comparisons. Information was also collected from each country's most recent State Party report to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>3</sup>; these provide an overview of the systems and processes in place and developments in policy and practice.

## **FINDINGS**

### **International collated data on child death and injury**

Scrutiny of international organisations' databases identified around 200 variables that were potentially relevant to the study. These were classified under the following categories: mortality/injury; risk factors/maltreatment; health/health care; demographics/social economic status. However, on closer examination it became apparent that none related directly to the presence of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect in the developed world. Eleven variables relating to child mortality were identified; the most relevant study was child death due to negligence, maltreatment or physical assault.

Child deaths and injury may be caused by a range of factors; only in the minority will abuse or neglect be a contributory factor. However, the numbers who die or suffer injury as a result of maltreatment are substantially underreported because the cause is not always correctly attributed (UNICEF, 2003). Caution is needed in comparing data because of differences in the definitions employed by different countries and/or states concerning what constitutes a maltreatment death or injury and because the causes may be misclassified by practitioners.

A European Injury Database (IDB) has been developed providing accident and injury data from selected hospital emergency departments. This complements existing data sources such as routine causes of death statistics, hospital discharge registers and data on specific types of injury, including for example, road accidents. In 2006 the IDB Violence Module was introduced to record injuries attributed to child abuse. However, in practice few cases have been registered, thereby preventing meaningful analysis. The IDB 2009 report, *Injuries in the European Union: statistics summary 2005-2007* does include a section on violence against children resulting in fatal and non-fatal injury at a European level (Bauer and Steiner, 2009). Denmark, Finland

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<sup>3</sup> Except in the USA as they have not ratified the UN CRC

and the UK supplied data. Work is currently underway to develop the IDB violence module further.

## **National datasets**

### ***Defining child abuse***

It is well recognised that common operational definitions for different forms of abuse at the international level facilitate cross-national comparisons, and that differences may compromise their validity (ChildONEurope, 2009). Different definitions will result both in different rates of identification and response and also in differences in the relative numbers or percentages of children classified as suffering each type of abuse. For instance, in some countries, physical punishment of children is banned, whilst in others it is considered acceptable, at least to a certain degree: this could impact on both the rate per thousand of children identified as being abused and also the extent of physical abuse as compared with other types of maltreatment. Overall, there was greater cross-national consensus in operational definitions of sexual abuse and physical abuse than neglect, emotional abuse and witnessing intimate partner violence.

### ***Safeguarding children: procedures and processes***

Each country and/or regional jurisdiction has legislation, policies and procedures which govern decision-making to protect and promote the welfare of children. Variations in these frameworks will influence: what data are collected and when; how it should be interpreted; and the comparability of the data.

Firstly, countries such as England and Norway have strong centralised systems; they are therefore more readily able to gather reliable national datasets than Canada, the USA and Australia where legislative frameworks and administrative systems differ between provinces, states or territories. Secondly, there are differences in the approaches employed to safeguarding children. These influence recognition of and responses to maltreatment, the services that are offered, and consequently the numbers of children identified at each stage of the safeguarding process. Gilbert and colleagues (2009) distinguish between a *child and family welfare approach* and a *child safety approach*. A *child and family welfare approach* operates in most Western European countries, including England, Norway, Denmark and Finland. A *child safety approach* operates in the USA, Canada and some Australian states. In this latter model child protection investigations are seen as distinct from the provision of child welfare services for those with lower levels of need.

### ***Availability and comparability of data***

#### ***Attribute data***

Every country collects data on children's gender and age, although the point at which these data were collected varied. There was also a lack of consistency in the age bandings each country adopted. Only Canada and the USA collect data on the nature of children's disabilities (at the point of investigation), although definitions and

classifications differ. Every country except Denmark and Finland collect ethnicity data, although the number of categories employed are more detailed in England than elsewhere.

### *Type of abuse*

Data on the type of abuse that children known to child welfare or child protection services have experienced are collected in every sample country except Finland and Denmark. However, the point in the child protection process at which these data are collected varies. In Australia, Canada and the USA, data on type of abuse is collected on substantiated cases following assessment or investigation. Data in England and Norway are collected later; when a child becomes the subject of a child protection plan or is in receipt of 'assistance in the home'. The stage in the process at which the data are collected may distort the proportions of children in each category and this should be considered when undertaking cross-national comparisons.

Exploration of the proportion of cases by abuse type in Australia, Canada, England, Norway and the USA revealed that the majority of maltreated children are either classified under the category of neglect (England, Norway and America) or emotional abuse (including domestic violence) (Australia and Canada). As outlined above, there is greatest definitional ambiguity at an international level concerning definitions of neglect, emotional abuse and witnessing domestic violence and the boundaries between them are blurred.

### *Referrals and notifications*

Australia, England, Finland and the USA collect and publish statistical data on the total number of referrals/notifications received but there are variations in how referrals are defined and the point at which data are collected. Mandatory reporting and whether referrals are confined to cases of suspected maltreatment or include requests for services will influence referral rates.

Australia, Canada, Norway and the USA publish data on the source of referrals. Australia, England and the USA publish data on the outcome of referrals.

At the referral stage Norway is the only country that publishes details on the child's needs. Categories include: inadequate care/abuse, conditions in the home, child's behavioural problems. In England data on needs is captured at the point when a child starts to receive services (CiN Census data). Australia, USA and Norway were the only countries to routinely publish information on the source of referrals.

### *Assessments*

Rates of assessments undertaken for each country varied, reflecting differences in policy and practice concerning the circumstances under which cases should progress to assessment. England and Finland operate a multi-tier assessment process and initial assessments are undertaken to inform decisions as to whether more in-depth (core) assessments are required. These assessments are not confined to cases where there are concerns a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. The rates of in-depth assessment per 1000 in both countries were not dissimilar; 12.6 per 1000 children in England and 13.7 in Finland.

Australia, Canada and the USA collect data on whether abuse is substantiated. In England, children who are the subject of a child protection plan are deemed to have passed the threshold to be classified as 'substantiated cases'. Analysis revealed that between 0.3% (England) and 1.3% (USA) of the total population had maltreatment substantiated. The lower rate in England may reflect the fact that harm may be substantiated without a child becoming the subject of a child protection plan, if it is judged that they are not continuing to, or likely to suffer, significant harm in the future; thus under-recording the number of children for whom abuse has been substantiated.

#### *Provision of community-based services*

There are challenges in undertaking meaningful analysis of the data that are collected on the numbers of children and families in receipt of community-based services due to variations in the child populations being served and in the nature of the services that are provided.

In England it is possible to explore the circumstances of children with lower levels of need as well as those suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm, whereas data collected in Australia, Canada and USA are predominately concerned with the latter (child protection and the child safety approach). In Denmark, Finland and Norway (child and family welfare approach) data are collected on all children in receipt of services but it is not possible to distinguish between children with different levels of need.

#### *Looked after children*

Overall, England publishes a greater level of detail about the population of children looked after by the State, including details of outcomes which are not currently available from any of the other sample countries.

Every country publishes data on the number of looked after children within their respective systems on a given date (in care/snapshot data) and details of the placements that children and young people are living in (see also Thoburn, 2007). However, definitions of looked after children vary and may include a combination of children voluntarily placed away from home and those on legal orders, or simply the latter<sup>4</sup>. Notwithstanding this, the rate per 1000 of new entrants to out of home care in each country for which these data are available are similar (2.3 in Finland, 2.4 in England and 2.6 in Australia) but there are more noticeable differences in the total care populations (England 5.3, Australia, 7.0 and Finland, 15.1 per 1000 children) which reflect different ideological positions on the use of out of home care, as well as economic factors.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

The findings reveal that, with the inclusion of data from the CIN Census 2010, England collects similar amounts of data on referrals and assessments as counterparts in other sample countries. The data available on looked after children

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<sup>4</sup> In England data include a combination of children voluntarily placed away from home and those on legal orders.

are more comprehensive than elsewhere. However, findings suggest that additional data items could be collected to strengthen the comparability of data on children coming to the attention of children's social care, including:

- Details on the source of referrals. Australia, Norway and the USA currently publish these data. Publication of comparable data in England would facilitate cross-national comparisons and would also be valuable in determining how the public and different professions respond to concerns about children's welfare. Recent research in England (Davies and Ward, forthcoming) demonstrates that certain professional groups are reluctant to report concerns that a child may have suffered, or be likely to suffer, significant harm and publication of these data would facilitate exploration of changes in practice in response to policy initiatives.
- Data on factors affecting parenting capacity, such as drug and alcohol use, mental ill health and intimate partner violence, alongside details on the types of services children and families are in receipt of would be of value to facilitate exploration of similarities and differences in family circumstances and subsequent service responses in different countries.

The ongoing challenges of comparing data on child abuse cross-nationally also reinforce the importance of qualitative research to assist in the interpretation of numerical data to minimise the risk of misinterpretation of quantitative findings. They also highlight the importance of international dialogue concerning definitions of key terms and concepts (ISPCAN, 2010) and to inform decisions about what data are collected and published to develop the knowledge base in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study demonstrates that currently key international organisations do not routinely collate and publish extensive datasets to facilitate cross-national comparisons. The quality and quantity of data collected at a regional or national level vary considerably, influenced by (among other things) different interpretations of the role and contribution such data can make to understand the needs of the child population and its use as a tool for monitoring service provision or performance. Variations in legal frameworks (both within and between countries), operational definitions of abuse and safeguarding policies and procedures also have a bearing upon what types of data are collected and their comparability with that collected elsewhere.

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### **Additional Information**

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>  
Further information about this research can be obtained from Jessica Dunn  
2 St Paul's Place, 125 Norfolk Street, Sheffield, S1 2FJ  
[Jessica.DUNN@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Jessica.DUNN@education.gsi.gov.uk)

This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.