
Safeguarding children: a comparison of England's data with that of Australia, Norway and the United States

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years increasing attention has been given to the value of cross-national research and analysis to illuminate strengths and weaknesses in child welfare systems (Freymond and Cameron, 2006; Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes, 2011; Hetherington *et al.*, 1997; Stein and Munro, 2008). International comparisons of child maltreatment may allow policy and practice in one or more countries to be benchmarked against others; and may also assist in the identification of alternative strategies to protect children from harm and promote their welfare (Freymond and Cameron, 2006; Hetherington *et al.*, 1997; Munro *et al.*, 2005). However, a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report concluded that:

child maltreatment (abuse and neglect) – has received less attention [than child well-being in international comparisons]. This is an important gap since the effect of maltreatment on individual children cannot be understated (OECD, 2011, p.246).

In this context it is valuable to explore the role and contribution that existing datasets may make to understanding variations in the recognition of and responses to abuse and neglect in different jurisdictions.

KEY FINDINGS

- Aggregate administrative datasets offer a readily available source of data to assist in exploring changes in recognition of, and responses to, child abuse within and between countries. However, caution is needed in interpreting these data to avoid drawing erroneous conclusions. A qualitative understanding of each country's child protection system and definitions of maltreatment, thresholds for action, safeguarding processes and recording practices is important to maximise opportunities to draw meaningful comparisons. Data also need to be understood with reference to policy and practice developments and research evidence.

¹ 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.

- In the last decade both central and local administrations in England, Australia, Norway and the United States (U.S.) have implemented multiple reforms and programmes that have served to change the structure and delivery of services aimed at safeguarding children from harm and promoting their welfare. Analysis suggests that policy changes have not moved substantial numbers of children out of child welfare systems; in England, Australia and Norway there has been an upward trend in referrals, assessments and the number of children in out of home care. In contrast, in the U.S. the out of home care population has been declining.
- In England the total number of children who were the subject of a child protection plan declined gradually from 1999 to 2005² (annual rate change of – 1.2%). Since then there has been a year on year increase in the number of children who have become the subject of a child protection plan.
- Both England and the U.S. have seen a decline in the numbers and rate per 1,000 of children returning to live with their birth parents. In the U.S. 145,341 were reunified in 1999 and this fell to 128,775 in 2010 (2.1 per 1,000 in 1999 and 1.7 in 2010). In England 11,800 returned home during the year ending 2003 compared to 9,800 in 2010 (1.1 per 1,000 in 2003 and 0.9 per 1,000 in 2010).
- Legal and policy development in England and the U.S. have sought to promote the use of adoption and encourage timely permanence. Since 2002 the adoption rate per 1,000 children in the U.S. has remained stable at 0.7. A similar pattern emerges in England. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 aimed to improve planning for permanence and increase the number of children adopted from care (Department of Health, 2000). Although there was a small increase in the number of children adopted from care in 2003-2005 the rates per 1,000 children adopted have remained constant at 0.3. Guardianship also offers an alternative permanence arrangement to adoption for children who cannot return home; in the U.S. between 3 and 7 percent of children exiting care, leave under these arrangements. Since its implementation in England in 2005, the number of children who achieve permanence through this means has increased; in 2010, 5 percent (1,260) of children ceased to be looked after when a Special Guardianship Order was granted.

BACKGROUND AND AIMS

The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (CWRC) was commissioned by the Department for Education to undertake a study with the overarching aim of drawing together existing aggregate administrative data on safeguarding children and child protection and exploring the availability and comparability of these data as a tool for comparing England's performance against that of other countries. The objective was to consider how different institutional and cultural approaches alongside different forms of provision and support may influence rates of abuse and neglect and the responses of public authorities. The study:

- 1) reviews the literature on child welfare data and recent policy and practice developments in England, Australia, Norway and the U.S.;
- 2) offers analysis and interpretation of the aggregate administrative data available in the countries above to explore changes in recognition of, and responses to, abuse and neglect over time;
- 3) maps changes in responses to children coming to the attention of child welfare agencies against significant events and key policy and practice developments; and

² With the exception of 2003.

- 4) examines the strengths and limitations of relying on administrative datasets to compare England's child welfare policy and practice with other countries and key issues that need to be taken into account when interpreting these data.

The study builds on a scoping review on the availability and comparability of child injury and safeguarding data collected and published (in English) in a sample of developed countries³, (Munro *et al.*, 2011) as well as a review of the comparability of statistical returns in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Munro, Brown and Manful, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Published aggregate administrative data⁴ on children coming to the attention of children's social care services during the period 1999-2010 have been collated for England, Australia, Norway and the U.S.⁵. These countries were purposively selected because preliminary research demonstrated that they collected sufficient administrative aggregate data to facilitate comparisons and because of the orientation of their child welfare systems; the sample includes countries that have historically been categorised as operating a child protection approach and those operating a family or welfare orientated approach (see below).

In recognition of the importance of interpreting quantitative data with reference to similarities and differences in social, political, legal and economic frameworks and policy and practice developments a scoping review of the literature was undertaken. In addition, an international working group of academics and data experts was established to verify the accuracy and interpretation of the administrative data and to explore trends and developments over time.

FINDINGS

Similarities and differences in child welfare systems and their implications

- Typologies of child welfare systems assist in understanding similarities and differences in the number of children who come to the attention of statutory children's social care services and subsequent service responses to meet their needs.
- In the 1990s Anglo-American countries including England, the U.S. and Canada were classified as adopting a *child protection approach* whereas Nordic and Continental European countries were classified as adopting a *family service approach* (Gilbert 1997; Gilbert *et al.*, 2009; Hetherington *et al.*, 1997).
- Countries adopting a child protection orientation tend to view child protection as distinct from a wider continuum of services for children with lower levels of need, to delay intervention and adopt a more legalistic approach. In contrast the family service approach is essentially needs based; 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.

³ A wider range of data items may be *collected* but these are not necessarily accessible to the public.

⁴ The study did not examine relative expenditure data.

⁵ Initially the research team had also planned to collate data from New Zealand but was not able to as these data are not publically available.

- Policy and practice developments have served to challenge traditional ideologies and orientations (Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes, 2011). Gilbert and colleagues (2011) suggest that as countries have sought to strike a new balance between child protection and family services a new orientation has emerged which is *child-focused* and the object of concern is the child's overall wellbeing and development.

Definitions of abuse and neglect and percentage of children affected by different types of maltreatment

- There is greatest definitional ambiguity at an international level concerning neglect and emotional abuse. These two types of maltreatment accounted for between 49% (Australia) and 54%⁶ (England) of identified cases of maltreatment in 1999; and 64% (Australia) and 72% (England) in 2010⁷.
- Data reveal that in England, Australia, and the U.S. the majority of maltreated children⁸ are now classified under the category of neglect (England and the U.S.) or emotional abuse (Australia)⁹.
- In the last decade there has been an increase in the percentage of children categorised under emotional abuse in England, Australia and Norway. This appears to reflect increasing recognition of the detrimental impact of this form of abuse on children's wellbeing and development and corresponding efforts to promote improved recognition and responses through changes in reporting triggers or legislation.

Referrals

- In general, data on numbers of referrals show an upward trend in each country between the late 1990s and 2010.
- England has a high but stable referral rate (at around 50 per 1,000 children) compared to Australia and the U.S. In interpreting these data it is important to note that in England referrals include requests for services thus inflating figures relative to the U.S. where referrals are concerned with allegations of maltreatment.
- In England between 2002 and 2010 there was a steady decline in the percentage of referrals that resulted in no further action, from 54% in 2002 to 35% in 2010. This could reflect improvements in recognition and responses to safeguarding concerns amongst professionals resulting in more appropriate referrals; or that social workers have progressed more cases to initial assessment because of anxiety within the system.
- In the U.S. referral rates have ranged from a low of 35.9 in 2002 to a high of 44.1 in 2008; since 2004 rates have been fairly constant. In contrast, Australia's referral rate had increased significantly over the last ten years from 23.6 per 1,000 in 1999 to 67 in 2009.

⁶ In England in 1999 if mixed categories of abuse applied then each category of abuse was recorded. Therefore, the percentage cited is the percentage of recorded categories of abuse rather than the percentage of cases.

⁷ Percentages have been rounded.

⁸ Substantiated cases in Australia and the U.S., child who are the subject of a child protection plan in England and children placed under protection in Norway.

⁹ There are variations between territories; in Western Australia and the Northern Territory neglect was the most commonly substantiated maltreatment type in 2009-10 (AIHW, 2011; Lamont, 2011).

Assessments and investigations

- Difficulties are encountered drawing meaningful comparisons between data on assessments due to differences in the processes undertaken and thresholds for instigating them.
- Overall the rate of assessment appears to have been on the rise in every country since 1999; although in Australia proactive efforts have been made to try and respond to difficulties encountered as a result of the 18.9% annual increase in the rate of change in the number of assessments undertaken during the period 2003-7.
- There are similarities in expectations of when initial assessments in England and investigations in Norway should be undertaken. In both countries assessments are undertaken if it is considered that the child may be a child in need (which includes children with special needs or disabilities) and requires services (HM Government, 2010; section 17, Children Act 1989; section 4.4, Child Welfare Act 1992). Data reveal that the rate of assessment in both countries has been on the increase but overall England has the highest rate, which stood at 35.9 per 1,000 in 2010 compared to 29.5 per 1,000 in Norway.

Substantiation

- In the U.S. both the number of cases and rate of substantiation per 1,000 children have fallen since 1999 (488,073 and 7 per 1,000 in 1999 compared to 443,005 and 5.9 per 1,000 in 2009). In Australia a more changeable picture emerges with fluctuations in numbers and rates of substantiation over the past ten years. Since 2005 the rate of substantiation has been falling and stood at 6.1 per 1,000 children in 2010. One reason for this may be implementation of programmes such as *Brighter Futures*, a child protection prevention programme which is targeted at families most at risk of entering the child protection system (Wood, 2008).

Out of home care

- There has been an upward trend in the number of children in out of home care over the period 1999-2010 in every country except the U.S. (where there was a decline from 567,000 in 1999 to 408,452 in 2010).
- The stock population in Australia more than doubled over the period from 15,674 in 1999 to 35,895 in 2010, whereas in England numbers increased fairly gradually between 1999 and 2005, fell slightly in 2006-8 before an unprecedented increase in the wake of media attention surrounding the Peter Connelly case.
- In Norway, despite heavy investment and a marked increase in the provision of assistance or in-home services the care population has risen by 48% in the past ten years.
- Although each country operates in a unique social, political and economic context, in 2006-7 the rate per 1,000 of children in out of home care in England, Australia and Norway converged at around five per 1,000.
- Data on new entrants to out of home care reveals a different picture to that on the in care population and illustrates that the rate of new entrants to out of home care is much lower in Norway than elsewhere (0.5 in 2007 compared to 2.2, 2.8 and 3.7 in England, Australia and the U.S. respectively) but that children tend to stay longer. One reason for this is that in Norway maintaining the blood tie between biological parents and children is presumed to be a moral and legal right and therefore adoption is rarely used (Skivenes, 2011; Weyland, 1997).

CONCLUSION

In the last decade both central and local administrations in England, Australia, Norway and the U.S. have implemented multiple reforms and programmes that have served to change the structure and delivery of services aimed at safeguarding children from harm and promoting their welfare. Routinely collected child maltreatment datasets offer a readily accessible source of data to assist in exploring similarities and differences in recognition of and responses to abuse and neglect and how these have changed over time. However, the study highlights that variations in the data collected, recording practices, definitions of abuse and neglect, thresholds for formal intervention by children's social care services and subsequent systems and processes to respond to these concerns make drawing meaningful comparisons challenging. That said the analysis does serve to highlight an upward trend in referrals, assessments and in the out of home care population in England, Australia and Norway, even though reforms have been implemented to promote early intervention and prevention. In contrast, in the U.S. there has been a decline in the number of cases of substantiated abuse and in the number of entrants to out of home care. Reasons for this include an increase in the use of 'voluntary' or informal kinship care which diverts children from the formal child welfare system. In addition, efforts have been made to promote timely permanence via adoption or legal guardianship¹⁰ for children who cannot return to live with their birth parents (Berrick, 2011; Gilbert, 2012).

¹⁰ The transfers the child's custody from the state to relatives (Gilbert, 2012).

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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
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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.