Referrals and Child Protection in England

This briefing provides a summary of and commentary on the article in the British Journal of Social Work published on 24th May 2016 titled: Referral and Child Protection in England: One in Five Children Referred to Children’s Services and One in Nineteen Investigated before the Age of Five by Andy Bilson and Katie E.C. Martin from the School of Social Work, Care and Community, University of Central Lancashire.

The full article can be accessed at: (http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2016/05/19/bjsw.bcw054.full)

The purpose of the research for the article was to explore how many children are involved in the safeguarding system over their lifetime or part of their lifetime. This is an important question in considering expressed levels of concern about children and levels of intervention in family life at population level. It provides insight into understanding the balance between referrals and assessments of children’s needs and the levels of help and assistance of all kinds provided to the children and their families.

Background

There has been longstanding concern about over-intervention in the child protection system. This was strongly voiced in influential Government funded research which led to the publication of Child Protection: Messages from Research in 19951 which made the criticism that too many investigations were undertaken with families assessed and subject to case conferences but very little help or support offered. It called for a better balance between section 47 enquiries and family support, with more resources focused on the latter and fewer formal investigations.

These criticisms of safeguarding social work practice with children and families have continued including that there is too much focus on risk management and incidents of harm rather than on the provision of help.

The article sets out the current statutory process for safeguarding children and notes the evidence of the stress that child protection investigations place on parents even where the relationship with the social worker is good. It further notes that though the formal policy direction over the last ten years has been to develop early intervention and use of tools such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) the national statistics over the last five years show a rapid increase in child protection investigations up 79.4% and an increase in the number of children with child protection (CP) plans up 40.4% over the last six years.

Method of the Research

The researchers made Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all 152 English Local Authorities (LAs). 114 or 75% provided some or all of the data requested. This provided a large sample from which the national picture can be developed. The data request was based on the Children in Need census and therefore should have been available for each LA. The information sought gives a picture of the number and percentage of children born between 1st April 2009 and 31st March 2010 who had reached various stages of the children’s services process before their fifth birthday. The period covered is 1st April 2009 to 31st March 2015.

The data showed that of all the children born in England in 2009/10 by 31st March 2015:

- 22.5% had been referred to children’s services;
- 17.0% had had an assessment;
- 14.3% were identified as a child in need;
- 6.3% were subject of a strategy discussion;
- 5.4% were subject of a section 47 enquiry;
- 3.5% were subject of a child protection plan.

Over the same period the numbers of referrals to LA children’s services increased by 5.3% and the numbers of children in need by 6.8%, much lower figures than the increases in investigative activity of 79.4%. The number of children investigated and not found to be significantly harmed increased from 45,000 in 2009/10 to 98,000 in 2014/15.

The article notes there is limited information on the numbers of children receiving early help either following referral to children’s services or as a step down following a child protection enquiry or on the impact of early help services to improve wellbeing or reduce the need for statutory interventions.

The trend for an increasing involvement of children in the child protection system is seen in a number of countries. As in England the growth is in the numbers of children identified as suffering emotional abuse and or neglect. In England the numbers of CP plans for emotional abuse increased by 54% between 2010 and 2015 and for neglect by 28% while those for sexual abuse increased by 2% and those for physical abuse fell by 3%.

The article comments on the relationship of deprivation to levels of intervention. The article sights the work of Bywaters et al.2 which found that 40% of children in care or on a child protection plan lived in communities in the tenth decile of deprivation. It goes on to say “...the evidence on individualised interventions to prevent further neglect and emotional abuse is sparse.” It further develops this concern about the link of deprivation to intervention by saying “This raises the question of whether increasing investigations followed by individualised interventions which necessarily involve an imbalance of power and parental blame is the best response to the majority of neglect and emotional maltreatment.”

Discussion of the Results

The discussion of the results described in the article focuses on how far the increase in formal responses to concerns about children’s welfare is an appropriate response. There is not the information available to know whether the children being referred to children’s services have already had an early help response. Earlier research suggests they probably did not. Ofsted’s 2015 study of Early Help found little follow-up on referred on/signposted services. Research by Thorpe et al which pre-dates the recent focus on early help suggested that almost three quarters of referred children did not receive services. The article sights evidence that the process of enquiry and investigation is alienating for families and makes it less likely they will engage with services.

The authors note the contrast between their findings, of a high proportion of referrals to children’s services proceeding to assessments and some kind of intervention and the increase in 2012 of 25% in CP investigations, and a report from the House of Commons Education Committee which recommended research into whether “thresholds for section 17 and section 47 interventions are too high and / or rising in some areas.” The question is raised whether those giving this evidence to the Commons Education Committee may have been more concerned about lack of help provided.

The evidence presented in the article is used to support the authors’ concern that the system is developing an increasingly forensic orientation with the worrying possibility that Early Help is having the unintended consequence of drawing more children into investigations of their welfare.

The article describes an alternative non-blaming approach as a counter to what it describes as the “lack of evidence that the child protection system reduces harm to young children.” It suggests that the high incidence of suspicion shown by the study is likely to have a traumatic impact on families and create a climate of fear for those living in poorer communities. The authors see the findings from their research as adding weight to the call for a radical shift in social work with children and families such as Developmental Social Work with its focus on advocacy, poverty alleviation and developing family and community strengths. It sights work by Featherstone et al 2014b and Midgley and Conley 2010.

The authors conclude by saying that “Whilst some children need to be protected, there is little evidence to support this scale of statutory involvement or the growing focus on early, and increasingly investigative, interventions alongside increases in removal of children from families into long term care, special guardianship and adoption.” They repeat their challenge from earlier in the article that there is little evidence that the individualised investigative approach is effective in preventing further harm.

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4 Thorpe, D., Denman, G. and Regan, S. (2011) RIEP and ACDS Funded Safeguarding and Promoting Welfare Research project, Kendal, Practice Research Overbeck
Commentary

The data the article presents together with its reflections on the impact this increase in the scale of investigative activity on children and families raises serious concerns about how the current safeguarding and child protection system is operating. The article’s statement that there is a lack of evidence that the child protection system reduces harm to children is contentious. There are studies which show reductions in the numbers of deaths of children due to abuse and neglect. The changes in numbers of investigations of child concerns also reflects our growing awareness of the harm to children caused by neglect and exposure to emotional abuse, especially the impact of domestic violence.

It can be argued that the increased child protection activity reflects greater awareness of the harm children are suffering and the need to make a response to that harm. What the article raises is whether this increase in safeguarding and child protection activity is making a difference to children and families or as the authors argue may be adding to the negative and alienating experiences of families already experiencing poverty and other forms of deprivation e.g. insecure housing, poor health. Given how few families receive services, including early helps services, it suggests that what is essentially provided is an investigative process. This will have little if any impact on improving children’s lives. The data in the article could be seen as a powerful argument for more resources for early help that would change the scale and depth of such services available across the country. This might then have an impact in reducing the need for investigative responses to safeguarding and child protection concerns.

This theme of a process driven service has been reflected in many other studies and enquiries such as that of Eileen Munro into the child protection system. Concern about a process driven response is also reflected in many of the projects funded through the DfE Innovation Fund which reflect a desire for social work practice based on relationships and social workers as agents of change and not as case managers and monitors of family life.

The ideas the article presents in its discussion of alternative models of practice that work alongside communities and families to tackle the adversities they face are not new. The current austerity programme means social workers see the wider social situation that is increasing the adversities which many parents face in providing a loving and stable home for their children but their job is to make a difference for individual children and families, including protecting children from harm. This drives individual rather than community and or campaigning responses to the adversities families and children face.
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