



Child Welfare
Inequalities Project



Identifying and Understanding Inequalities in Child Welfare Intervention Rates: comparative studies in four UK countries.

Briefing Paper 2: UK Four Country Quantitative Comparison



Headlines

The project aimed to quantify and begin to understand inequalities in the proportions of children who are either subject to child protection plans or registers (CPP) or who are being 'looked after' in out of home care (LAC) in the four UK countries. This Briefing focuses on the quantitative data.

We found that in every country children in some places are much more likely to be looked after than children in other places. Within each LA or Trust and within each country these differences are systematically linked to how poor they and their families are. This is seen for children of different age groups, for boys as well as girls and for children on CPPs as well as for LAC. These findings parallel inequalities in health and education with long term consequences for health and wellbeing.

There is a strong social gradient in rates of intervention in all the countries. Each step increase in deprivation is accompanied by an increase in children's chances of being a LAC or on a CPP. The gradient appears to be less steep in Northern Ireland than in the other countries and steeper in Wales than in England.

Some substantial differences were found in the proportions of children who were on CPPs or LAC in the four countries with different patterns also found in the ratio of CPP cases to LAC cases.

However, the overall inequalities in CPP and LAC rates between countries cannot be explained by deprivation levels as the most deprived country: Northern Ireland, has the lowest LAC rates and the second lowest CPP rates.

Substantial elements of the differences in overall LAC rates between Scotland, England and Wales can be explained by the differences in deprivation, demography, legal systems and what is counted in LAC statistics.

Data that would allow comparisons of expenditure on children's services between the four countries are not currently available. It is impossible to say how expenditure may influence national intervention rates across the UK with any confidence.

Factors that may be relevant to the lower rates in NI include less inequality, stronger communities and a greater emphasis on community based family support services. However, these hypotheses remain to be tested.

Of course, this research is unable to determine whether outcomes for children were better or worse as a result of lower intervention rates.

Some broad policy directions are suggested: a policy objective of reducing children's services inequalities, greater attention to the impact of socio-economic conditions on children's life chances in policy, practice and training and better data, including data about family circumstances. A review of the costs and benefits of different levels and distribution of expenditure between the countries would be valuable but would depend on greater comparability in expenditure data.

1. Introduction

Across the four UK countries, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, very substantial inequalities are found in the proportion of children on child protection plans or registers, or who are looked after. Within each country deprivation plays a key role in these inequalities. But between the four countries, relative deprivation is not the primary explanation for differences.

This is the central finding at the national level of a new study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation (2015-17), designed to quantify how unequal children's chances are of being looked after or on child protection plans and what factors underpin these inequalities. The project drew heavily on the ideas, methods and evidence developed about health inequalities.

The four UK countries now have devolved powers for policy and practice in children's services, covering both child protection and family support services. While, in all four countries, responsibility is further devolved down to local administrative units and a broadly common culture might be said to exist, profound and growing differences can be found between the nations. These differences exist in the legal frameworks, structures and political priorities but also in the make-up and size of the child population, the children's services data collected and reported by the four governments, service patterns and trends over time (Bunting et al., forthcoming; McGhee et al., forthcoming). This makes the four UK countries a valuable opportunity to examine the consequences of a 'natural experiment' in approaches to children's services but also presents major obstacles to comparing like with like across the national boundaries.

2. The Study

The Child Welfare Inequalities Project has been carried out by a large team of researchers based in 7 UK universities, led by Professor Paul Bywaters of Coventry University. For more details see below and www.coventry.ac.uk/CWIP. The team have carried out three kinds of linked enquiries:

- Quantitative studies of children who were being looked after in care (LAC) or who were on a child protection plan (CPP) in each country in 2015
- Background reviews of previous research and other literature, to place findings in their legal, policy, practice and research contexts
- Case studies in 6 LAs in England and Scotland, supplemented by focus groups in Wales and Northern Ireland, examining in depth how decisions about individual children and families are made and what factors influence those decisions, including professionals' responses to family poverty.

The quantitative study involved over 24,000 LAC and 12,000 CPP, more than 10% of all such children across the UK. The children were living in 55 different LAs (or Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland). The sample included 100% of children in Wales and Northern Ireland, 50% of children in Scotland and a representative 12% of children in England. The different national sampling frames were designed to ensure that there were sufficient numbers of children in each country to allow for meaningful comparison and statistical analysis.

The literature reviews covered three key areas: the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect, jointly funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (www.jrf.org.uk/report/relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect-evidence-review); and the legal and policy context for trends in CPP and LAC rates across the four countries (Bunting et al., forthcoming; McGhee et al., forthcoming).

The case studies used an integrated methodology (Morris et al. forthcoming) to:

- Explore how staff, systems and practices understood and worked with poverty and deprivation
- Test the inverse intervention law (IIL – see below) and examine the variables behind this pattern.

The case study sites were based in six carefully selected LAs in England (4) and Scotland (2), and each LA hosted a primary site and secondary sites. In total we gathered data in 14 sites, some matched for levels of deprivation, others to cover a range of neighbourhoods.

3. Comparing Children's Services

Although senior commentators have called for the data systems across the UK to produce comparable statistics (Munro et al., 2011), in practice there has been limited progress towards this goal. Each country collects, analyses and publishes its own data set. While the English and Welsh systems have the most in common, considerable caution has to be exercised in making comparisons. Rather than aiming for comparable data our objective was to be able to present data in ways that would enable meaningful appraisal, supported by a better understanding of the key differences.

These include:

- A fundamentally different legal system in Scotland from the other countries, with Children's Hearings at the heart of practice
- A major structural difference between Northern Ireland and the other three countries, with children's services being managed through joint Health and Social Care Trusts rather than LAs
- Different political contexts in which services are run, with different political parties currently leading each of the four governments
- Major differences in the size of the child populations served, from over 11m in England to around 1m in Scotland, 600,000 in Wales and 400,000 in Northern Ireland
- Major differences in the composition of the child population with over 20% of children in England being from minority ethnic groups, but less than 7% in the other countries
- A variety of differences in data collection, analysis and reporting, for example, in the definitions of looked after children, the categories used to record abuse, the recording of children living permanently away from their parents and approaches to kinship care.

4. Poverty, Deprivation and Children’s Services

Although a large volume of data is collected and published by the four governments about children in contact with children’s services, in none is there information systematically collected about the children’s parents. We do not know the income levels, employment status, housing circumstances or educational background of the children’s families. We do not know whether their parents are still together, married or single, healthy or disabled, younger or older. This fundamental gap in our knowledge has not been covered by systematic research studies and, as yet, administrative data linkage does not adequately meet this gap. So we have almost no detailed systematic knowledge of the comparative contexts in which the parenting of children in contact with children’s services is taking place across the UK, the resources parents have available and the difficulties they are face.

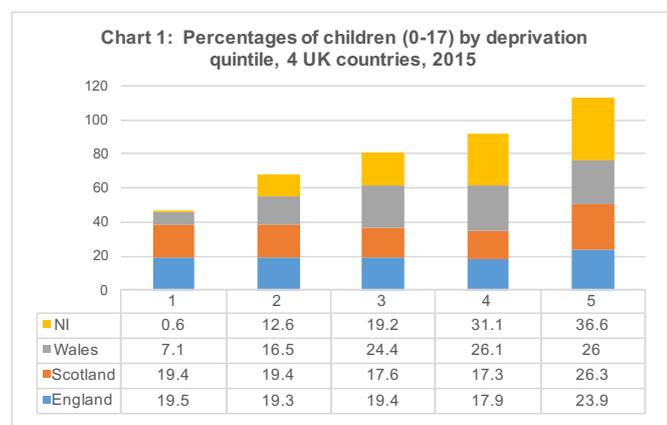
Given this lack of information, or robust mechanisms to link children’s services data with other data sets on parental circumstances, this project used deprivation scores for small geographical neighbourhoods as a proxy indicator of family socio-economic status.

Multiple Deprivation (MD) scores are calculated for various levels of geographical areas in all four countries. In each country these are based on an analysis of the lives of people in small geographical neighbourhoods. National MD scores are calculated from a list of measures covering fields such as employment, income, health, education and the environment. Broadly speaking, it is the proportion of households in a neighbourhood who are disadvantaged in these respects that produces the deprivation score. However, the precise measures and the weighting given to them varies in the four countries, and the smallest geographical areas to which scores are attached are different in Northern Ireland (Super Output Areas) and Scotland (Data Zones) to those in England and Wales (Lower Super Output Areas). The data on which these indices are based is also drawn from different time periods. To make the four country comparisons, we constructed a single UK index following the methodology pioneered by Payne and Abel (2012) based on measures of income and employment.

Deprivation scores can then be calculated as population weighted averages for whole LAs or Trust areas. Different countries and different LAs within countries face very different patterns of deprivation affecting the children that children’s services support and help to keep safe.

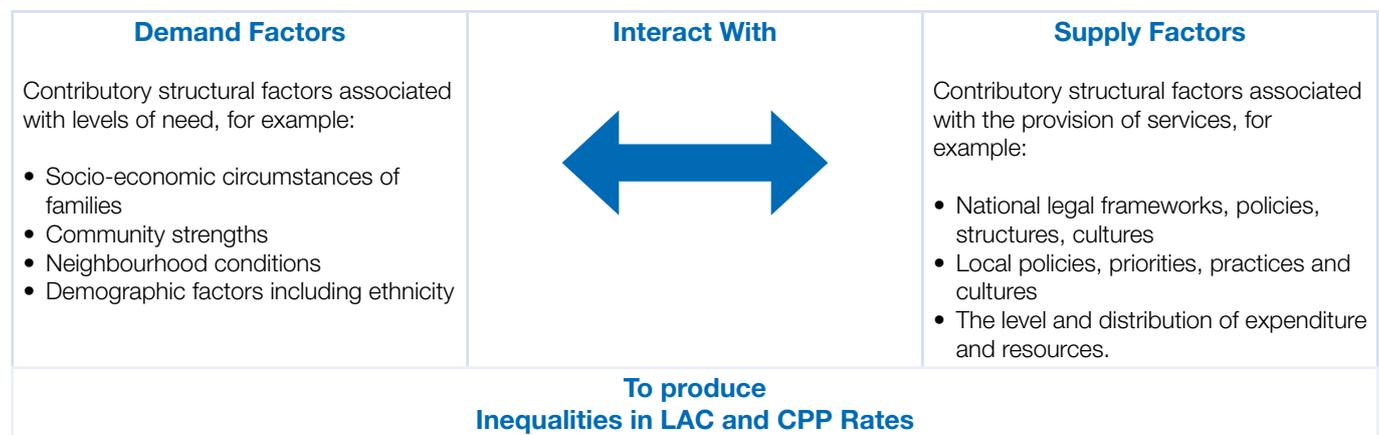
5. Childhood Deprivation in the UK.

We collected data relating to 18 English LAs, all 5 Trusts in NI, 10 LAs in Scotland and 22 in Wales. As Chart 1 demonstrates, children in Northern Ireland, especially, and Wales were much more likely to be living in higher deprivation neighbourhoods than those in England and Scotland, which had a broadly similar pattern. In all countries children are over-represented in the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods (Column 5), but the proportions in the least deprived quintile (Column 1) are starkly different. Close to 70% of children in NI were living in the most deprived 40% of neighbourhoods in the UK but only a little over 40% of children in England.



6. Understanding Inequalities in Rates

We developed and tested the following basic model for understanding inequalities in the proportion of children in different LAs or countries who were LAC or CPP on the 2015 census date. The main forces influencing these rates are the interaction of factors we call 'demand' and 'supply'.



'Demand' refers to the social determinants of childhood difficulties. As with health inequalities, family socio-economic circumstances, the quality of the environment or community in which children are being brought up and links with the demographic mix of the population are all contributory factors. The fundamental conditions for bringing up children (money for essentials, adequate housing, social support), intertwined with other factors such as levels of domestic violence, substance use and parental physical and mental health, influence the proportion of children who might come to the attention of children's services in any given area.

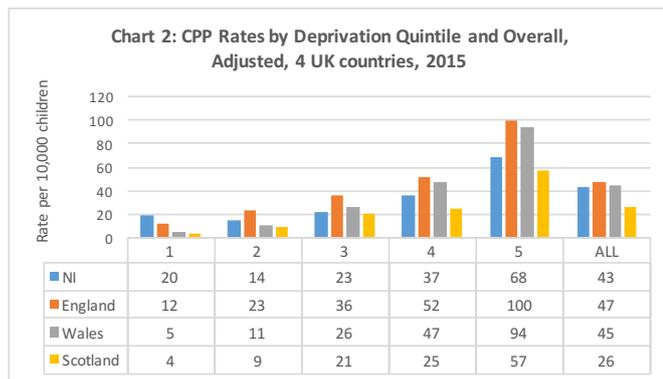
But considerable differences also exist in responses to such needs as a result of a range of factors affecting the supply of services. Contributory supply factors include national policies, legal frameworks, and dominant attitudes, local priorities, the leadership, experience, skills and stability of the workforce, local professional and political cultures and the scale and distribution of resources available to children's and allied services.

7. Findings 1: Deprivation and Demand for Child Protection Services

Within each country there is a very strong association between the level of deprivation and the proportion of children who are LAC or CP. This correlation is very strong and statistically significant in each country. Differences between areas of high and low deprivation are not a matter of a few percentage points but multiples. There is a strong social gradient: each step increase in deprivation is accompanied by a higher LAC or CPP rate. Chart 2 shows this for children on CP. The steepness of the gradient – how much each step up in deprivation influences the CP rate - varies between countries, being steeper in Wales and Scotland than in England, and flattest in NI. It is unclear why this occurs.

However, differences between UK countries in overall CP rates cannot be explained by levels of deprivation as Chart 2 shows. If deprivation was the main factor explaining inequalities in rates between countries, NI would have the highest rates and England the lowest. In fact, England and Wales have higher rates, NI and, especially, Scotland the lower rates. The lower Scottish rates may reflect the use of Supervision Orders in which children are placed at home. For some of these children there may well be child protection concerns but they may not be on the register because they are considered protected by the Order. Another key difference is that in Scotland, almost no children aged 16 to 17 are on CP registers, unlike in the other countries. However, this does not explain the lower rates overall in Scotland which are seen in all other age groups.

The very different distribution of children by deprivation quintile in the countries means that the overall figures mask other significant differences. Although the overall rate in NI is similar to that in England and Wales, NI rates are in fact much lower in the 2 highest deprivation quintiles where two thirds of NI children were living. (The high NI rate in quintile 1 should be discounted as it reflects only a handful of children.) The differences between countries can only be understood when deprivation patterns are also taken into account.



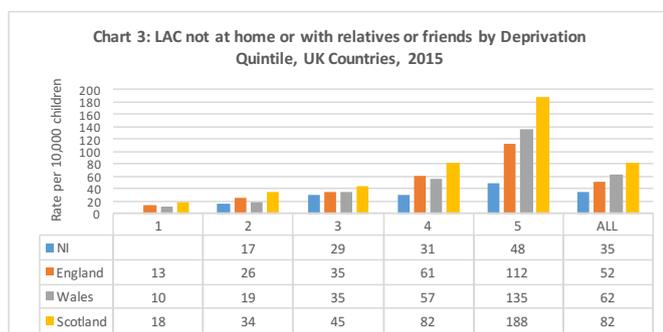
8. Findings 2: Deprivation and Demand for Looked After Children Services

Table 1: Percentage of LAC in each UK country placed with parents, relatives or friends.

	With parents	With a relative or friend	With parent, relative or friend
England	5	11	16
Wales	11	16	27
Scotland	23	29	52
NI	16	31	47

Comparing LAC rates between UK countries is profoundly complex because of the different legal systems, definitions, levels of deprivation and proportion of children in ethnic minority groups. The key legal and definitional issues are as follows. In Scotland LAC numbers include children on Compulsory Supervision Orders, many of whom are placed at home. There is no direct equivalent in England or Wales. There are also different practices across the four countries in respect of the engagement of relatives and friends in providing care to children. (See McGhee et al., forthcoming, for a detailed discussion.) Partly but not solely due to these factors, the practice of placing children who are looked after with either parents, relatives or friends, rather than in foster or residential care with unknown carers, varies widely from country to country as Table 1 shows.

The profound differences in the proportions of children placed with carers already known to them means that the most valuable comparison of LAC rates only focuses on the remaining LAC (Chart 3). This chart illustrates a number of important points. First, as with CP, there is a strong social gradient in all countries, with some variation in the slope between countries. Second, overall rates in NI are less than half those in Scotland and much lower than in England or Wales. Again, this pattern does not reflect the balance of deprivation between countries. Third, when equivalent quintiles are considered, it can be seen that in the highest deprivation neighbourhoods, the inequalities between countries are even greater with NI rates less than half those in England and close to a quarter those in Scotland. Fourth, when children placed with parents, relatives or friends are removed from the picture, LAC rates in England and Wales are similar except in the most deprived quintile where Welsh rates are 20% higher.



In addition some children live apart from their parents through state involvement but do not appear in LAC data. In England and Wales there has been a rapidly increasing use of Special Guardianship Orders, intended to achieve permanent placements for children who cannot live with their parents. Children on SGOs are no longer included in LAC numbers. A similar order in Scotland, permanence orders without authority to adopt, continues to count children as LAC. Similarly, children who are adopted through the care system are no longer included in LAC numbers and the priority given to adoption in the four UK countries has varied somewhat in recent years although it is difficult to achieve precise equivalence. Bilson (private correspondence) has calculated that in England in March 2016 more children were in out of home care through adoption (53,000) or SGOs (20,000) than were LAC (70,000). The cumulative effect of SGOs and adoption is therefore potentially considerable. It may contribute to the apparently higher rates in Scotland compared to

England and Wales, but cannot explain the much lower rates in NI where SGOs are not part of the legal framework. A further difference between countries is the ratio of CP rates to LAC rates. Using the measure of LAC in Chart 3, Scottish LAC rates were around three times CP rates, whereas in NI CP rates are higher than LAC rates, and in England and Wales LAC rates are only a little higher than CP rates. Once again this draws attention to apparently fundamentally different patterns of children's services in the four countries – at least using these measures.

9. What should be done?

This project was designed to identify and quantify inequalities. In many respects the project raises questions as much as it answers them. Testing changes in policy and practice will require further work. However, some broad conclusions can be drawn.

- In all four countries reducing structural inequalities in children's life chances, such as those identified in this research, should be a national priority for children's services as it is already for health and education. Children's services should not only seek to create equally good services for all children but should also seek to minimise inequalities in demand for services and outcomes for children. This policy objective should be a key dimension in inspection processes.
- More attention should be paid to the implications for children's services of the impact of destitution, poverty and financial insecurity on family life. Supporting families to survive and thrive should be a more central children services priority, as a contribution to preventing fractured and damaging relationships in families and protecting children. This objective should be underpinned by wider economic and social policies. It has to inform education and training and be embedded in processes such as assessment, case review and managerial oversight.
- More research and more closely aligned data systems are required to inform responsible authorities of the reasons behind inequalities in patterns of involvement with children's services and the consequences for children. Such data systems need to include systematic information about parents and their circumstances.
- Knowledge about the economic costs and benefits of the differing approaches to providing children's services in the four countries would also be valuable. Comparing expenditure levels is not currently possible on the data available.

The Study Team

The study was undertaken by a team of researchers from 7 UK universities, led by Professor Paul Bywaters from Coventry University. The team responsible for this work is:

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The Nuffield Foundation

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