Linking two administrative data sets about looked after children

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SUMMARY

Permanently Progressing? Building Secure futures for children in Scotland is a longitudinal study following the progress of all children who became looked after in Scotland in 2012-13 when they were five and under. It includes analysis of the annual Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) which is based on information submitted by local authorities about children in care in their area. The Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration (SCRA) also collects data about children involved in the Children’s Hearings System. This means that important information on the same children is held in SCRA and CLAS data. Yet, until now these data sets had never been linked. This research tested the feasibility and success of this data linkage to allow fuller analysis of both the child and process factors associated with pathways to permanence at home or away from home (or lack of permanence) that could not be achieved using CLAS or SCRA data alone.

WHAT WE DID

We gained permission from the Scottish Government to access anonymised CLAS data on the total cohort of 1,836 children in all 32 local authorities who: were aged five or under on 31 July 2013 and started to be looked after at or away from home between 1 August 2012 and 31 July 2013. The Scottish Government provided anonymised child-level data on this cohort of children covering a four-year period (1 August 2012 – 31 July 2016). Valuable additional data about the majority of the children in our cohort is held by SCRA about the grounds for referral to the Children’s Reporter and the subsequent progression through the Children’s Hearings System. As these datasets do not share a common identification number we matched children’s records using date of birth, gender and local authority at the time children became looked after in 2012-13. Overall, we successfully linked records for 1,000 children (see Hooper et al, 2019).


Early engagement and timely intervention is a core aim of policy and practice (Scottish Government 2015a). The linkage showed that for 418 of the 1,000 children, professionals had previously been sufficiently worried about them to make a referral to the Reporter. Almost 60% of children who had a previous referral were under one year old at the time of that referral. The Reporter had not arranged a Children’s Hearing in relation to the majority (88%) of those referrals, however subsequent concerns led to the child later becoming looked after in 2012-13.

The Permanently Progressing? study also interviewed 160 decision makers (Whincup et al 2019). They expressed concern that referrals to the sheriff led to delays and took this into account when making decisions. The linkage showed that for the majority (81%) of the 1,000 linked children there had been no appeal. The variation in rates of linkage (54% to 97%) demonstrates that local authorities may wish to reflect on their data collection procedures and quality assurance checks. This is important in meeting the Scottish Government’s expectation (2015b) that data needs to be accurate if it is to be used by policymakers and practitioners to plan and evaluate services.

WHY IT MATTERS

1) Across the total sample, 67% of children had records which matched as expected, leaving 33% where records either did not match or matched unexpectedly.
2) There was considerable variation across local authorities in the rate at which data matched, from 54% to 97%.
3) Two-fifths (418) of the 1,000 linked children had a previous referral recorded by SCRA. Almost 60% of the children who had a previous referral were under one year old at the time.
4) For most (88%) of the 418 children the previous referral did not lead to a Children’s Hearing.
5) For one in five children there was an appeal to the sheriff, but for the majority (81%) there was no appeal.

WHAT WE FOUND

WHAT NEXT?

At the moment, CLAS and SCRA data on the same child does not share a common identification number. In some countries a unique personal number is used across administrative contexts (see Harron et al, 2017). This is an option which policy makers may want to consider.

Phase Two of the Permanently Progressing? study is due to start in autumn 2020. By that point our cohort of 1,836 will be in middle childhood, and we plan to link CLAS and education data.