OVERVIEW OF ADMINISTRATIVE DATA ON CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IN ENGLAND

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Overview of administrative data on children's social care in England

Abstract

The analysis of administrative data has some unique potential for social work research, including fuller coverage than sample studies, a longitudinal dimension, the avoidance of some forms of reporting bias and low cost. This paper provides a concise overview of the children's social care data sets that are available for the whole of England. These are based on data from local authorities and the data sets are managed nationally by the Department for Education. The content of the data sets is introduced, some examples of their usage to date are provided and further ideas are presented of how these data sets could be used in future by both researchers and child welfare organisations, including local authorities. Linkage to other administrative data sets, e.g. from health care and education, has particularly strong potential for improving our knowledge about children's social care.

Introduction

It is increasingly recognised that the use of administrative data for research is highly desirable where it can be achieved, for several reasons (Brownell & Jutte, 2013; Hurren, Stewart & Dennison, 2017). Firstly, the sample sizes achievable are more representative and far larger than can be achieved with original data collection, therefore allowing for sub-group analysis amongst other things. Secondly, data are not subject to reporting bias such as the stigma that can apply to self-reporting certain kinds of contact with social services. Thirdly, data collection tends to be longitudinal, allowing for change over time to be assessed. Fourthly, administrative data remove the burden on research participants to disclose sensitive issues. These datasets can often be easily anonymised, reducing ethical difficulties with their re-use. Fifthly, there is considerable potential for linkage to data from other sectors – e.g. linked education and social care data – which can help establish certain outcomes. Finally, the use of routinely collected data is considerably cheaper than primary data collection.

The aim of this paper is to introduce the administrative data on children's social care that are available at a national level in England, and some of the ways in which they have been used by researchers to date, in order to showcase the potential application of these data for both academic researchers and child welfare organisations. In keeping with other papers on UK datasets for social care research, such as Maxwell, Scourfield, Gould and Huxley's (2012) summary of social work variables in cohort and panel studies, this paper provides an introduction to datasets which have been relatively little

used to date for social care research, but have strong potential for improving our collective knowledge about children's social care. Full profiles of specific children's social care datasets are provided by McGrath-Lone, Harron, Dearden, Nasim and Gilbert (2016) and Emmott, Jay and Woodman (2019). Also, Jay, Woodman, Broadhurst and Gilbert (2017) provide an overview of population data on family justice, which include data from the family courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) as well as social care.

Summary of national datasets

The following sections only introduce national children's social care datasets for England. There are also datasets from the family justice system (see Jay et al., 2017), but these are not included here as they include data on court proceedings and Cafcass contacts, and our specific focus is children's social care.

Aggregate data on children's social care at local authority level

The Department for Education provides a freely available tool for local authority staff to use which brings together all local-authority-level aggregate data into one file, termed the Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT), currently to be found at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-interactive-tool-lait. This can be used as it is, or data can be copied into a new file for further manipulation. The Department is currently developing a new tool with more facility for producing data visualisation. The LAIT allows local authorities to compare themselves with statistical neighbours.

There are 620 data sets within the LAIT. These are presented in the following main categories: health and well-being; child protection; children in need; adoption; looked-after children; the children's services workforce; youth offending; education in the early years, key stages 1, 2, 4, 5 and at age 19; children with special educational needs; pupil absence and exclusion; further and higher education; finance in children's services and education; and economic factors. Practical uses of the LAIT tool include sharing and learning from good practice via regional benchmarking clubs using LAIT and Local Government Inform (National Audit Office, 2016). The children's social care data which refer to children receiving services are taken from the individual-level data sets referred to below.

Individual-level data on children

The Department for Education can provide anonymised individual-level data for research use, following a permissions process. Researchers request access to DfE data

extracts via a mailbox (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-access-department-for-education-dfe-data-extracts) and access is provided though the ONS Secure Research Service (https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/paidservices/virtualmicrodatalaboratoryvml). The process involves completing an application form detailing the data required, rationale for the use of the data and classifying data identification risk and sensitivity levels. The form needs to be approved by the Information Asset Owner and the Data Sharing Approval Panel, before a final agreement and declaration are signed. There is a users' group of researchers from universities and local authorities who use these data sets, which is convened by the Rees Centre at Oxford University (contact rees.centre@education.ox.ac.uk).

Children in Need Census

The Children in Need census collects anonymised individual level data on all children in need, their reasons for referral, which organisation made the referral, the primary category of need and which children are under a child protection plan. The data are collected annually covering cases open between 1 April and 31 March. The dataset is not longitudinal, meaning it can be difficult to reconcile figures and make direct comparisons between years.

The data collected includes child identifiers (ID number, unique pupil number, date of birth, gender); child characteristics (ethnicity, disability); children in need details (referral data and information regarding assessment); and child protection plans (start and end dates, category of abuse). A full list of the data collected and further information can be found in the Children in Need collection guide (Department for Education, 2018) and statistical release (https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-children-in-need). A full cohort profile is available, from Emmott, Jay and Woodman (2019).

SSDA903 data return: children looked after by local authorities

The Children Looked After data return (SSDA903) provides individual-level information on all children looked after and those who have recently left care. This longitudinal dataset is an amalgamation of data returns from all the local authorities in England every year. The data in the database include date of birth, gender, ethnicity, category of need, episodes of care, type of placement, duration of placement and legal status. For children who cease care due to adoption, information is collected in the time between the adoption processes, from the time of the best interest decision to matching with adopters, placement in the adoptive home, up to the time of the adoption order. Data collection began in 1992 when children's social care came under the Department of

Health, but from 1998-2003, the sample was reduced to one third. Since 1 April 2003 all looked after children have been included in the data collection. From 1 April 2008 onwards, data collection has expanded to include health information (including immunisation) and Strengths and Difficulties (SDQ) scores (Goodman, 1997) on children's emotional and behavioural problems.

The purpose of the dataset is to monitor the care and outcomes of looked after children, as well as allowing for the evaluation of governmental policy initiatives on this population (McGrath-Lone *et al.* 2016). It allows for records at the individual child level to be linked across years for longitudinal data analysis. However, these identifiers are specific to each local authority. If a young person moves jurisdictions, they often will have multiple identifier numbers. A full open access profile of this dataset (SSDA903) has been produced by McGrath-Lone *et al.* (2016).

How have these datasets been used by researchers to date?

What follows is not a systematic review of the use of these datasets but selected examples are presented from the results of Google Scholar searches using the terms 'SSDA903', 'Children Looked After return', 'Children in Need Census' and 'Local Authority Interactive Tool', in addition to studies already known to the authors. Other research has been undertaken and published.

Aggregate data at local authority level

Hood, Goldacre, Grant and Jones (2016) used local-authority-level data to explore changes over a thirteen-year period in children's social care demand, workload and workforce in England. Trends were ascertained over time illustrating the fluctuations in service demands as well as highlighting a sharp increase that occurred after the publicity surrounding the death of Peter Connelly, which connects the impact of external effects and events to demand on service. Bywaters (2015) has shown that child protection and looked-after children rates correlate with multiple deprivation at a local authority level. This study found that the ratio of children looked after between the most deprived local authority and the least deprived was 8:1, and for those on child protection plans it was 13:1. Both these studies using aggregate data illustrate the demand on social services, especially in areas where there are increased levels of deprivation. Wijedasa, Warner and Scourfield (2018) used the same aggregate data to study changes in rates of children looked after over a five-year period (2012-17). They found decreasing care rates in local authorities to be associated with decreasing proportions of low-income families.

Individual-level data on children

Individual level data on children in care have been used to study the outcomes of different types of placements in care. In 2012, Wijedasa and colleagues were one of the first research teams to be given access to all national level data on children in care and adopted in England and Wales, which enabled a longitudinal analysis of permanent placement outcomes for children in care (Wijedasa & Selwyn 2017). The study, which linked the national administrative data to a national survey of adoption managers, found that the rate of adoption disruption over a 12-year period was very low in England and Wales (Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2017). The analyses also revealed that teenage years pose the most risk to adoptions disrupting.

In a further example from the same programme of child welfare inequalities research as mentioned above, Bywaters and colleagues (e.g. Bywaters *et al.*, 2018) used anonymised data on individual children from both the Children in Need Census and Children Looked After data return to study the association between child welfare intervention rates and deprivation in lower super output areas (geographical units of 1500 households on average). Their analysis showed that, at the level of the individual, there was also a strong correlation between neighbourhood deprivation and intervention rates. They also found large differences between ethnic categories.

In an analysis of repeated referrals to Children's Services, Troncoso (2017) used both the Children in Need Census and Children Looked after Data sets to determine the characteristics of those who were referred, as well as analysing the likelihood of being re-referred to Children's Services. The results showed that in 2010-11, 15% were re-referred, but in subsequent years these numbers continued to rise, doubling in 2011-12 and 2012-13 and then rising to where half of the children initially referred in 2010-11 have been re-referred to Children's Services at least once.

Individual-level data sets have also been used to study the cost of intervention. Holmes and colleagues used both the Children in Need Census and the Children Looked After data set in the development work for their Cost Calculator for Children's Services software (http://www.ccfcs.org.uk/, see Ward & Holmes, 2008; Holmes, McDermid & Trivedi, 2015). This innovation uses a bottom-up approach to estimate costs associated with social care and placements for looked after children.

McGrath-Lone's (2017) doctoral research used 20 years of Children Looked After data to determine the usage of out-of-home care, which was further broken down analytically to include: incidence of out-of-home care, cumulative out-of-home care histories, types of out-of-home care, patterns of out-of-home care, re-entries to out-of-home care, and changes over time in the use of out-of-home care. Her research found that one in 30 children born between 1992 and 1994 had entered care by the age of 18. This number increased to one in ten for black children. Furthermore, McGrath-Lone noted that since 1992, not only have increasing numbers of children been coming into care, but once in care they have had increasingly longer and more stable placements.

Exploiting the data in this manner can allow for greater knowledge about out-of-home care.

Data linkage

Anonymised, linked administrative data sets have considerable potential for identifying outcomes for children and families. Linkage can greatly increase the potential of any single dataset because it allows for data from another administrative domain to also be accessed, giving a more holistic view of the individual. Data linkage also allows comparisons to be made between the users of social care and the rest of the population.

Sebba et al. (2015) conducted a study into the educational progress of children looked after in England, by linking the Children Looked After dataset to the National Pupil Database. Educational outcomes were compared for children looked after, children in need and other children (i.e. neither in care nor in need). Their results showed that children who were neither in care nor in need had the highest educational performance, followed by children looked after (both early and late entry), then children in need, and lastly children looked after for less than twelve months. They also found that the attainment gap between those children who are looked after and those who are not increases over time.

In a further example, Mike Robling and colleagues are extending their 'Building Blocks' study (Robling et al., 2016) by following up families of mothers who received help from the Family Nurse Partnership (a specialist home visiting intervention for first-time teenage mothers) in the longer term to establish children's social care involvement. This is good example of how routine data can be used to supplement or even replace prospectively collected data in trials. Their work has involved developing a regulatory compliant model of data linkage (Lugg-Widger et al 2017) bringing together health data (from NHS Digital in England), education and social care data, such as the Children in Need Census Dataset and other data from within the National Pupil Database, along with the original trial data held by Cardiff University. In doing so, they are linking the Children in Need Census to routine health care data. Using an anonymised linking field, the linked data housed within the set will be accessed as anonymised, via the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) databank infrastructure (Lyons et al., 2009) at Swansea. There the dataset resides as standalone project not linked to the main SAIL dataset. Secure remote access is provided only to named approved researchers who analyse the date via the SAIL portal. Outputs are monitored for compliance and released after checking to the Cardiff team. The same intervention is also being evaluated by the same research team in Scotland. This natural experiment is solely using routine data to track health, education and social care outcomes and again using a remote portal to a data safe-haven. The team's experiences of using linked routine data across multiple data providers have been published along with some guidance for other researchers (Lugg-Widger *et al.* 2018).

What potential do they have for future use?

As can be seen from the examples in the preceding section, researchers are attempting to use the administrative data available on children in the social care system to establish outcomes for children. However, one of the biggest limitations of using stand-alone social care datasets to explore outcomes is that the analyses is limited by the number of outcome variables that are available in these datasets. Linkage to other data sets, such as from health care and education, holds a better prospect for research on outcomes than analysis of social care administrative data alone.

The work described above has generally concentrated on researchers accessing administrative datasets aggregated from each local authority to the Department for Education. However, it is also important to recognise and champion the use of data within local authorities to improve services.

The existing tools, like the Local Authority Interaction Tool (LAIT), Department for Education's First Statistical Releases or the Children in Need Census do not easily facilitate local authorities using datasets to understand their own practice and benchmark them against others. This is because snapshot local authority level datasets do not always provide sufficient insight to know what is working; some definitions are used inconsistently between local authorities, which makes comparisons difficult; and local authorities do not necessarily have a forum to discuss the practice behind the data with their comparators. The systems used in local authorities to enter data are designed as tools for recording by social workers, so they are not well designed for extracting data for reporting or analysis. A lot of time is spent in local authorities cleaning data to make statutory returns and developing bespoke reports for performance reporting. Any additional analysis using data that are not in the statutory returns also means a lot of data cleaning and creation of new reports.

In terms of using available data on service provision decisions, some councils for their Joint Strategic Needs Assessment already use basic demographics of the care population (see, for example, London Borough of Haringey, 2012). It is important to be realistic about local authorities' capacity for statistical analysis, in terms of staff time and staff skills, but there is certainly potential for greater use to be made of these datasets for day-to-day decision making at the local level.

What Works for Children's Social Care is co-funding the piloting of "Insight Communities", clusters of local authorities who agree common definitions of metrics so that there can be prompt investigation of why one service appears to be performing better than another and whether that is replicable elsewhere. The aim is to accelerate the development of knowledge about what works for whom, to what extent, under what circumstances, and for this rapid feedback to assist decision-makers in local authorities with the design and management of services.

The Child Welfare Inequalities Project, referred to earlier (e.g. Bywaters et al., 2018) has led to the development of a user-friendly application by Calum Webb at Sheffield

University. This is designed for local authorities to use themselves, to investigate social inequalities within their own children's social care activity.

Conclusion

Whilst the above summary covers only a selection of the work being done in this area, the Department for Education's children's social care data sets are under-used, both by local authorities and researchers. For both groups, it may be that a relative lack of quantitative research capacity is part of the picture. Certainly, this is an issue in the academic fields of social work and social care in the UK (Scourfield, Rees, Shardlow & Zhang, 2018). The datasets certainly have limitations, in focusing largely on service outputs rather than outcomes for children and families. However, linkage to datasets from other administrative domains such as health and education has more potential for assessing outcomes. Even for stand-alone social care datasets there is also considerable potential for greater use of both aggregate and individual-level data. To repeat the advantages of using administrative data for research, these data sources provide greater reach, more representative samples, less intrusion into family life (if used anonymously) and lower cost research than the alternatives, so deserve to be more widely used that they currently are.

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