Systematic Review Protocol
School non-attendance by children with a social worker in the UK: a rapid review of extent, risk factors and interventions
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School non-attendance by children with a social worker in the UK: a rapid review of extent, risk factors and interventions

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Summary

School attendance and absences for children with a social worker (CSW) are an important concern for schools and local authority children's services. Within the population of children with a social worker there are heterogenous requirements for their needs, experiences, and outcomes. A rapid review can provide evidence to help practitioners and policy makers, akin to that provided by a full systematic review, in a more resource efficient manner. This is particularly important when timely evidence is vital to address high priority decisions. In June 2021 the Department for Education (DfE) announced a £16 million funding boost to help level up opportunities for children with a social worker and extend the role of the Virtual School Head (VSH).

The aim of this rapid review is to provide evidence on the extent of school non-attendance among different groups of CSW, the effectiveness of targeted interventions and the associated risk factors for school non-attendance amongst CSW.

The structure for this protocol template draws on the PRISMA-P (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analysis Protocols) 2015 checklist

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Part 1) Rationale and question formulation

Rationale	A recent review of Children in Need conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic (Department for Education, 2019) identified that children with a social worker (CSW) were almost three times more likely to have missed 10% of possible school sessions (and be classified as persistent absentees) than their peers that had never had a social worker. Similarly, children in care have a higher absence from education rate than those not in care. The link between high absence and lower attainment is well documented, however, there is mixed evidence of this association for children in care and scant research for children in need or with a protection plan. Additionally, official statistics and studies of school absence/exclusion can only include students who are enrolled; however, our recent research has shown that CSW are more likely to become unenrolled from state secondary school than their peers (Jay et al., 2022). Therefore, to fully describe the extent of school (non-)attendance among CSW it is necessary to account for the competing interests of enrolment, absences, and exclusions. A systematic review (Evans et al., 2017) conducted five years ago, on interventions specifically for children in care identified 3 interventions with most studies included coming from North America and of little generalisability to the UK. There is evidence in the UK that Virtual Schools in England (Ofsted, 2012) have improved outcomes for children in care although there is still a lack of robust research into their effectiveness. Our proposed review will also describe the current evidence about what interventions work to improve school attendance for CSW in the UK. These interventions will include Virtual Schools, whose remit has recently been extended to all CSW (Department for Education, 2021). Understanding the risk factors for school non-attendance could help to target groups of CSW at highest risk and inform the design of future interventions. Our proposed review will also seek to summarise the available evidence in this area. CSW are heterogenous in their underlying needs, social care experience and outcomes (e.g., rates of absence between children looked after (CLA), children on child protection plans (CPPs) and other children in need (CiN) differ considerably (Department for Education, 2019). By focusing on all CSW this Rapid Review aims to collect information on interventions that have been targeted to all subgroups.
Research question(s)	Our review aims to address three research questions (RQs):

1. What is the extent of school non-attendance among different groups of CSW (e.g., CiN, those on CPPs and CLA)?
2. What are the risk factors/drivers for school non-attendance among different groups of CSW, including child-, family-, social care- and school-level factors?
3. What is the effectiveness of targeted interventions to improve school attendance of different groups of CSW?

Population	Any UK school aged child (5-17) that had a social worker (RQs 1-3)
Intervention	Any intervention from Children's Social Services, Schools, Charities or Research institutions aimed to improve attendance and reduce time missing formal education (RQ3 only; not applicable to RQs 1 and 2)
Control	Children who did not have a social worker (either with another risk factor for non-attendance or general population) or different sub-groups of CSW (RQs 1 and 2), or those that did not receive an intervention aimed at improving school attendance (RQ3)
Outcomes	Attendance, absences, exclusion or non-enrolment/off-rolling rates

Part 2) Identifying relevant work

Search Strategy

Electronic databases	- ERIC & British Education Index (EBSCOhost) - PsycInfo, Social Policy & Practice (Ovid) - Social Science Database, Education Database, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts (ProQuest). - Social Care Online (SCIE) Key terms are detailed in "key search terms" section, below.
Other sources	We will conduct hand searches for studies on the websites of the WWCSC, Rees Centre, CoramBAAF, National Children's Bureau, Department for Education and National Foundation for Educational Research. We will also conduct a search of Google Scholar with the below key terms, searching for first 200-300 results as per the recommendations of Haddaway et al. (2015). ("looked after children" OR "children in need") AND ("school attendance" OR "school absence" OR "missing school") AND ("united kingdom" OR "england")

	Depending on the size of the body of evidence identified, we may conduct snowball searches of all included studies (i.e., hand searches of reference lists and Google Scholar to search for papers citing) to identify further relevant studies.
Key search terms	The below search terms will be used in the database searches. These have been piloted; see the attached spreadsheet for numbers of hits in each of the databases. *"foster care" or "foster home" or "foster family" or "foster parent" or "foster carer" or "substitute family" or "family foster home" or "kinship care" or "residential care" or "child* in care" or "out of home care" or "looked after child*" or "child* in need" or "vulnerable child*" or "social service*" or "social care" or "Children Act" or "Children (Northern Ireland) Order" or "CIN" or "child protection plan" or "child in need plan" or "CPP" or "CINP" or "social work*".* *"educat*" or "school*" or "class*" or "college*" or "teach*" or "learn*" or "train*" "absen*" or "truancy" or "attendance*" or "missing school" or "missing education" or "exclusion*" or "exclud*" or "off roll*" or "push* out"* *"England" or "English" or "UK" or "United Kingdom" or "Britain" or "British" or "ALSPAC" or "BCS" or "LSYPE" or "MCS" or "NPD" or "National Pupil Database" or "NDCS" or "YCS"*
Draft search strategy	Please see above. The search strategy will reported following the PRISMA-P guidance (Moher et al., 2015). A full list of the search strategy syntax will be included in the appendices of the rapid review.

Study selection criteria

Inclusion criteria	Inclusion Criteria Each study will be eligible for inclusion under each RQ separately. A study may be eligible to address one or more RQ. ● RQ1: any quantitative study which provides data on absence, exclusion or non-enrolment among CSW. Any design (e.g., cross-sectional/cohort and with or without a control group) will be included. ● RQ2: any quantitative study that assesses the association between one or more risk factors (e.g., gender, school type, deprivation) and attendance among CSW. These may include general population studies where interactions or disaggregations for CSW are reported ● RQ3: any study that evaluates an intervention targeted at CSW/groups of CSW. These may be, among other things, RCTs, pre-/post-intervention analyses, qualitative evaluations, or mixed-methods studies.

Exclusion criteria	*Limits*: The review will be limited to English-language studies published since 2010 to provide the most up-to-date evidence only. We also propose limiting to studies related to school- and college-aged children (4 to 17 years, inclusive) in the UK only. Differences in social care and education systems mean that a review of international literature and its potential relevance to the UK context is beyond the scope of a rapid review. An English language limit will be applied to keep this study within the scope of a rapid review. As our aim is to examine the evidence as it relates to the UK, an English language limitations is highly unlikely to be a biasing factor.
Process of study selection	DSE will perform the database and supplementary searches. Following a search from each database a RIS file will be downloaded containing the titles and abstracts which will then be imported into reference management software. DSE will screen the studies based on the titles and abstracts using a Google Form against the agreed inclusion criteria. The Google Form will be piloted on the first fifty search results and amended if necessary. A second reviewer will also carry out screening. Screening results will be downloaded as an Excel spreadsheet and full texts will be sought for those that meet inclusion criteria. Full texts will then be independently screened for eligibility by DSE and second reviewer also using a Google Form. Differences at all stages will be resolved by discussion and, if necessary, by adjudication by a third reviewer. Exact duplicate studies will be removed automatically using the database search engine (where available) and the reference management software. Any remaining duplicates identified will be removed by hand during screening. Publications that report on the same study will be analysed together, taking information from both reports to obtain a complete picture of the study.

Study records

Data collection	Data from included full texts will be extracted by DSE using a Google Form (see **Data items** below) and exported to Excel. <table><tr><td>**Risk**</td><td>**Mitigation**</td></tr><tr><td>Limited evidence</td><td>For All studies: expand to children with other disadvantages; contacting other researchers. For RQ3 only studies: there will be 2 potential mitigating factors - pushing back the start time for the search (pre-2010) and/or</td></tr></table>

		- stricter search terms
	Report misses critical information to enable evaluation of the study	Attempt to contact authors
	TIDieR checklist: interventions not fully reported on	Report on this explicitly in a global evaluation of the evidence base

Data management process	Selected studies will be saved in the reference management software and screening and data extraction will be done using Google Forms. Results will be exported to Excel.
Data items	From the included papers we will extract: ● author ● study year ● population ● geographical and temporal extent ● research questions ● TIDierR checklist of the intervention (where relevant) ○ brief name, why, what (materials), what (procedure), who provided, how, where, when and how much, tailoring, modifications, how well (planned), how well (actual). ● methods ● results
Outcomes and prioritisation	Outcomes our school absence/attendance, exclusion (fixed-term or permanent) and non-enrolment (including off-rolling). There may be variation in how these outcomes are defined in the studies (e.g., persistent absence rates or mean percentage of sessions missed) and we will report on this accordingly.

Part 3) Risk of bias assessment

Risk of bias assessment criteria	Standardised quality assessment tools will be applied to all included studies by two reviewers. The view of a third reviewer will be sought if consensus cannot be reached. The choice of quality assessment tool will be determined by the design of the included studies and the appropriate JBI	Critical Appraisal Tool for the study design.
Purpose of risk of bias assessment	Results from risk of bias assessment will be incorporated into our narrative synthesis in examining the strength of the evidence. Risk of bias assessment will not form part of any inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Part 4) Summarising the evidence

Data synthesis	Data will be synthesised narratively following the Guidance on the Conduct of Narrative Synthesis in Systematic Reviews (Popay et al., 2006). Quantitative evidence on the extent and risk factors for non-attendance will be summarised by sub-group of CSW (e.g., CiN, vs those on CPP, CLA, however defined in the studies as this may vary) wherever possible. Any studies that report findings related to the COVID-19 pandemic will be presented separately. Data synthesized from studies to answer research questions 1 and 2 will be presented together. Using the TIDieR methodology developed by Hofmann et al., (2014), interventions will be presented together where there are similarities in the following TIDieR checklist areas: why, what (materials), what (procedure), who provided, how and where. Alongside the TIDieR checklist studies will be presented together, where the evidence that can be drawn from the evaluation studies is also appropriate.
Meta-bias(es)	As this is a rapid review, as opposed to a full, systematic review, there will be a risk of meta-bias induced through not identifying all possible studies. This will be acknowledged in the final report. Formally assessing meta-bias will not be appropriate.
Confidence in cumulative evidence	The strength of the body of evidence will be assessed narratively, taking into account study methodology, findings and risk of bias.
Reporting and interpreting findings	Results will be reported and interpreted narratively. We expect to report on either CSW as a whole or sub-groups of CSW; this will be determined by the included studies. It is likely that results will be presented in summary tables. Our discussion will consider policy and practice implications.

Registration

Ensure the review is registered with the OSF and that the registry is updated with outcomes at the end of the project.

Personnel

Mr David Sanders-Ellis PhD student, University College London. Will act as Research Assistant carrying out the searches, data extraction/synthesis and writing.

Dr Louise Mc Grath-Lone Research Fellow University College London. Will act as Research Fellow inputting to data synthesis and writing.

Dr Jenny Woodman, Associate Professor in Child and Family Policy, UCL, will act as Project Advisor, providing feedback on data synthesis and writing.

Professor Ruth Gilbert, Professor of Clinical Epidemiology UCL will act as Project Advisor, providing feedback on data synthesis and writing.

Dr Matthew Jay (PI) Research Fellow, University College London, is the Principal Investigator, overseeing the progress of this project, liaising with WWCSC and inputting to quality assessment, data synthesis and writing.

Other research assistants will be appointed as necessary.

Timeline

Dates	Activity	Staff responsible/ leading
Week 1/2	Refine review parameters (in conjunction with WWCSC)	DSE/MJ
Week 2/3	Piloting (e.g., search terms, data extraction form)	DSE
Week 3	Finalise protocol and publish (if appropriate)	DSE/MJ
Week 4/5	Conduct database searches	DSE
Week 5/6	Conduct grey literature searches	DSE
Week 6-8	Record screening	DSE/Research assistants (RAs)
Week 8-10	Data extraction	DSE
Week 11/12	Quality assessment	DSE/RA
Week 12-15	Synthesis	DSE
Week 15-20	Writing	DSE
Week 20	Submit draft report (for WWCSC feedback and review process)	MJ
Week 21-23	Prepare lay summary (e.g., in blog post format)	DSE/RAs
Week 24	Revise and finalise report in response to feedback/reviewer comments	DSE/MJ

References

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