Outcomes for Looked After Children

Looking After Children: Transforming Data into Management Information Study Interim report on the longitudinal cohort findings at 30.9.99

The Looking After Children: Transforming Data into Management Information Study is designed to explore how data gathered in the course of social work interactions with individual children can be aggregated and used at a more strategic level. This interim report on the data from the case files of 242 children looked after by six local authorities, whose progress is being monitored over three years, produced the following findings.

- Participating authorities are now better able to access information about looked after children through their management information systems, but most are still reliant on inaccurate and incomplete data.

- Authorities which have introduced a system of 'dipping' or scanning files encounter major problems with information retrieval.

- By far the largest age-group (17%) of this long stay sample of looked after children were babies, admitted before their first birthday. Overall 41% of the total sample became looked after before they were five.

- For 70% (169) of the children and young people, the primary cause of need was a difficulty faced by a parent or caregiver. Any strategy designed to reduce the numbers of children who stay long looked after will need to include services that address the needs of parents.

- The incidence of abuse in this long-stay sample is about double that found in the overall population of looked after children in the relevant year of entry (1996-97).

- Overall, there were fewer changes of placement in the second twelve months of care or accommodation. However the number of placement moves in the first twelve months was a poor predictor of stability in the second.

- 42% of moves from residential placements in the first year and 21% in the second were the result of disruptions.

- 44% of all moves in the first year and 48% in the second were categorised by social workers as 'planned transitions'.

- For younger children a change of placement frequently indicated greater permanency: 42 children moved into placements with prospective adoptive parents in the period between admission and 30.09.99

- Children attaining below the expected levels in both English and Mathematics had, on average, experienced more changes of school than those who attained the expected DfEE levels.

- Almost all the children and young people who had left care by 30.9.99 were aged under five or over 13. Those who left tended to have had more placements than those who stayed.

- Care plans made at entry for about two thirds of the sample to be reunited with birth families proved, with hindsight, to have been over optimistic.

Loughborough University

Project aims

The overall aim of the programme is to discover what information agencies need to monitor the effectiveness of services for looked after children, identify where improvements can be made and decide how scarce resources can be better deployed. The longitudinal study is designed to help authorities understand more clearly how children's experiences while looked after impact on their psychosocial development.

Methodology

The sample is composed of 242 children from six local authorities, who entered care or accommodation between 1st April 1996 and 31st March 1997, and were still in care or accommodation on 1st April 1998. Data relating to children's needs and developmental progress have been collected at entry to care or accommodation, at 1st April 1998 and at 30th September 1999. Findings are routinely discussed with a benchmarking group of senior managers from the authorities involved. This is an interim report, pending the analysis of the final tranche of data, collected at 30th September 2000.

Availability and accuracy of data

While most authorities had an operational management information system by 30.9.99, the level of technical support varied. Data held on such systems could not always be easily accessed by managers and practitioners. One authority had attempted to deal with the problem of storage by scanning case files onto the computer three months after case closure. Such files could only be retrieved with extreme difficulty, causing major problems for the research team and also for operational staff. In all authorities data held on case-files were still often missing or out of date.

Children's needs

In this group of children and young people who stay long looked after, it is noteworthy that very young children are substantially over-represented.

There are twice as many babies admitted before their first birthday as children in any other age group; 41% of the total sample were admitted before they were five. Overall, more than half the children appeared to have an identified physical or health condition of sufficient gravity to require out-patient treatment; by 30.9.99, 31% of those aged three or more had a statement of special educational need or one pending.

The primary cause of need for 70% (169) of these children was a difficulty faced by a parent or caregiver: 55 (23%) were known to have at least one parent with mental health problems, 57 (24%) had at least one parent with a physical illness and 57 (24%) had at least one parent dependent on drugs or alcohol. Abuse or neglect was a major factor in the admissions of 120 (50%) of the total sample and 68 (69%) of those of children aged under five. This is about double the incidence found in the overall population of looked after children in the relevant year of entry.

Placement stability

Stability of placement is fundamental to the achievement of successful welfare outcomes for looked after children and is the reason for the introduction of national targets intended to reduce the frequency with which they move. In this long stay sample 39% (94/240) of children remained in the same placement throughout the first year they were looked after; 31% (75/240) had three or more moves.

In the second year of care or accommodation the level of instability reduced, as more suitable permanent placements were found: 60% (124/208) of children experienced one placement and 14% (29/208) experienced three or more. Nevertheless there were concerns about the continuing instability of placements for children aged 0-4: this youngest age-group had the highest percentage of children who had three or more placements in the second year. Moreover, ten children in the full sample experienced three or more placements in both years.

Overall, the number of placement moves experienced by children in the first twelve months appeared to be a poor predictor of instability in the second year. Some children appeared to be experiencing a series of very short placements whenever a major one came to an end. Such moves are likely to be built into the system, and may be an area which authorities could address in the drive to reduce instability.

In both years, the most common reason given for a change in placement was a 'planned transition', accounting for over 40% of all moves. However, concerns have been raised that in some instances this term may mask placement disruption or breakdown. For example, over the two years, seven of the placements with parents, which one presumes would have been intended as permanent arrangements, ended in a 'planned transition'. A further cause of concern is the number of placements

that disrupt at the carers request. A disproportionate number of residential placements broke down: 42% of moves from residential units in the first year and 21% in the second were due to disruptions. Overall, it is apparent that certain children are experiencing multiple disruptions over a lengthy period. The 40 disruptions in the first year involved 27 children; the 20 disruptions in the second year involved 13. The six disruptions from residential units in the second year involved two young people whose placements each broke down three times.

Whilst placement instability gives cause for concern, it should be noted that not all placement moves are detrimental. Forty two of the younger children moved into permanent placements with adoptive families during the study period.

There was, however, also evidence from interviews with children and young people that the desire to reduce placement changes and meet targets could discourage social workers from moving them even when they were unhappy and had requested a change.

Leavers and stayers

By 30 September 1999, 81 children and young people had left the care of the authorities; 42% (34) were aged under five and 42% (34) were aged thirteen or over. The younger children had either moved on to adoptive families (20:59%), returned to their birth parents (13:38%) or were placed with relatives (1:3%). The teenagers either moved to independent living (14:39%), returned to birth families (15:42%) or went to live with other relatives (2:6%).

Changes in care plans

At entry to care or accommodation social workers had anticipated that a third of this sample would return to their birth families within six months or remain with them through the provision of support services. A similar number were offered a time limited assessment, also suggesting a social work expectation that the child or young person might soon return home. Retrospectively these plans appear to have been over-optimistic. This is particularly true, in view of the proportion of parents suffering health conditions or addictions that are likely to severely restrict their parenting capacity. Indeed, 12-24 months after admission, for a substantial proportion of the sample, return to birth families was no longer deemed a viable option.

Education

In the early stages of the project, data on children's educational experiences were frequently absent from case files. By 30.9.99 more information was available, although considerable gaps remained. The data showed a significant relationship between the number of placements and the number of school exclusions (Fischer exact test p=0.023 two sided). There was also a trend for school attendance to be related to the number of placements experienced.

Eighty nine children were aged between 7 and 15 on 31 August 1999, and therefore eligible for SATs, although six of them did not sit the exams. For the remaining 83, information about actual or estimated levels of attainment were available for 58% (48) in English and 59% (49) in Mathematics. Just over half those children who did not have a statement of special educational need achieved the expected levels in English and Mathematics. Children attaining below the expected levels had, on average, experienced more changes of school than those who attained the expected levels.

Implications for policy

The findings continue to demonstrate how local authorities need to explore further the data required for national statistical returns if they are to understand their performance on specific indicators. Analysing the data by age group produces unexpected findings concerning the experiences of younger children. The education data demonstrates the need to establish baseline information at the point of entry to care or accommodation.

Given the predominance of very young children in this sample, together with the finding that 70% were admitted to care or accommodation as a result of difficulties faced by a parent or care giver, it is evident that strategies aimed at reducing the numbers of children who remain long looked after will need to include the development of services designed to address the needs of parents.

Principal researchers

Harriet Ward, Director

Tricia Skuse (Research Fellow)

Ian Macdonald (Research Fellow)

Project length

November 1996-December 2002

Funder

Department of Health

Where to find more evidence

Full report

Skuse, T., Macdonald, I. and Ward, H. (2001) *Outcomes for Looked After Children*, Third interim report to the Department of Health on *Looking After Children: Transforming Data into Management Information*, Loughborough, Centre for Child and Family Research.

Four final reports from this project are due at the end of 2002

Full details of other outputs can be found in the CCFR brochure or on the website: **www.ccfr.org.uk**

This paper was written by:
Emily Munro, Ian Macdonald, Tricia Skuse and Harriet Ward