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Making Sense of Scotland’s Child Neglect Data June 2022

Neglect - the bigger picture

I have long held the view that collecting data to “feed the machine” is futile unless that data can usefully be turned into intelligence that helps us better protect children.

As we face intense challenges from poverty and inequalities, everyone – from elected politicians through to practitioners and families – can be provided with data which can give us a better picture of what’s actually happening with child neglect.

As it is, CPCScotland’s Child Neglect Subgroup has worked hard to promote an understanding of child neglect through structural, strategic and practice lenses. We know that the neglect of children is a multi-faceted type of harm, and recent research indicates that the rising cost of living, increasing levels of child and family poverty, and cuts to family support services are already intensifying the risk factors of neglect. Given this I believe it is particularly heartening to hear the term “**societal neglect**” gaining currency and acceptance.

Given the current economic challenges, it is more important than ever that we, leaders in this area of work, need to collect, understand and circulate data which provides a clear picture of how we are faring when it comes to child neglect.

Aims of the research

While we know that many children experience neglect, thus far we have not had an agreed way of measuring it, whether in terms of its risk factors, incidence, or its impact on children. CPCScotland’s Child Neglect Sub-Group has sought to address this gap by developing a means of **measuring (and then monitoring) neglect at the population level in Scotland.**

We knew that neglect could not be measured by one single indicator. Instead **over 50 indicators have been brought together** over a 5 year period to provide insight into neglect in Scotland. However, making sense of these indicators is not straightforward because:

- Many of the indicators are best described as proxy measures of neglect;
- Some indicators were not collected in 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Where 2020 and 2021 data is available, we do not know for sure whether the data is representative of long-term, structural or societal trends or distinct due to the pandemic
- Finally, there are also many aspects of neglect that we do not currently collect or publish data on e.g. children's non-attendance at hospital and/or GP appointments, health and obesity of primary and secondary school age children, neglect recorded at early stages of the child protection process, and children's persistent non-attendance at school.

Key findings

Notwithstanding the caveats above, we can see trends in the data that show where the Scotland picture is improving and where it is worsening.

Beginning with the indicators with **improving trends**, these are:

- **Maternity indicators** (e.g. antenatal bookings, maternal smoking rates and babies of low birthweight).
- **Developmental concerns of infants aged 13-15 months.**
- Number of **children reported as missing.**
- **Exclusion of pupils from school.**

In contrast, the indicators that are presenting **worsening trends** are:

- **Children living in child poverty** – including children receiving foodbank parcels.
- **Children living in temporary accommodation.**
- **Obesity** among Primary 1 school age children.
- **Children on the Child Protection Register with Neglect** as a recorded concern. Domestic Abuse has also been increasing.
- **School pupil attendance**, with this most pronounced among secondary school age children. However, there is not currently a measure of persistent non-attendance in Scotland (e.g. of children attending less than 80% of school dates).

The data also shows the **close relationship between children on the Child Protection Register due to neglect and services finding it hard to engage with families.**

Implications

I hope that these indicators provide a basis for ongoing monitoring of neglect in Scotland and, indeed, for making improvements to the neglect-related data we collect. I would also hope that the research encourages further discussion and analysis of what sits behind the data – for example, what factors are contributing to neglect, and what approaches have been effective in supporting families and addressing neglect?

The research also encourages us to consider improvements to policy, services and practice. With close alignment to recent recommendations put forward by Bywaters and Skinner (2022) of: (i) national 'levelling up' policies that cut family poverty, especially deep and persistent poverty, and insecurities affecting income, housing and employment; and (ii) the children's social care system engaging much more effectively with children's and families' basic material needs as a key factor for child protection; the Scotland data points towards the importance of:

- **Poverty-aware practice** when working with children and families, particularly at a time when cost of living and child poverty levels are already high and worsening.
- **Financial support for families** whether in the form of increases to welfare payments, direct payments to families, and subsidising energy, housing and food costs.
- **High quality relationship-based practice** (that may extend to intensive family support services) to build connections with families that services are finding hard to engage and work with.
- **Noticing and responding to early signs of potential neglect**, such as developmental concerns of infants, child diet and obesity, non-attendance at school, parental mental health and substance use.

Conclusion

This research could not have come at a more opportune moment. It gives CPCScotland members the necessary data analysis to promote policies, strategies and practice that will make a real difference for children and families who are struggling with the impact of poverty and inequalities. However, this is just a start and if we really do want to make a difference, we all need to work harder at listening to the voices of children and families and find a way to translate voices into data which in turn influences policy and action which may make an even bigger impact.

To access 'A Review of Scotland's National Indicators Relating to Child Neglect' report (May 2022) go to [insert web link