

Permanently Progressing?

Building secure futures for children in Scotland

Linking administrative datasets about looked after children

Insights for policymakers and practitioners

The Scottish Government's Looked After Children Data Strategy (2015) seeks to provide a robust and reliable body of data to realise the policy ambitions set out in the Scottish Government's strategy *Getting it right for looked after children and young people: Early Engagement, Early Permanence and Improving the Quality of Care*. The Data Strategy specifically seeks to enhance knowledge of the outcomes for looked after children through linking administrative datasets to provide a broader evidence base and inform more effective interventions.

The *Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland* study is following the progress of all children who became looked after in Scotland aged five or under in 2012-2013 (n=1,836). In Phase One (2014-2018), the study tested the feasibility of linking administrative data from the Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) with data from the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) and created a linked dataset.

This briefing paper summarises key findings and contributes towards the discussion on how best to maximise the potential of rich data to underpin effective policymaking and interventions regarding looked after children in Scotland.

Key findings

- Linkage of CLAS and SCRA data was possible, but time consuming and complex.
- Using date of birth, gender and local authority as identifiers, records were successfully matched for 1,000 children.
- Across the total sample, 67% of children had records which matched as expected, leaving 33% where records either did not match or matched unexpectedly.
- There was considerable variation across local authorities in the rate at which data matched; from 54% to 97%.
- 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.
- For most (88%) of the 418 children, the previous referral did not lead to a Children's Hearing.
- For one in five children there was an appeal to the sheriff, but for the majority (81%) there was no appeal.



Study

Researchers 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. This data was analysed to track the pathways and timescales to permanence for the 1,836 children.

Information is also collected by Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA data) on all children involved in the Children's Hearings System at each stage of the process including where a referral does not result in a Hearing.

Permission was given by the Scottish Government and SCRA to link data using a secure data environment.

The aims of the study were to:

- test the feasibility and success of data linkage
- to use this new, rich dataset to allow fuller analysis of both the child and process factors associated with pathways to permanence or lack of permanence for looked after children that could not be undertaken using CLAS or SCRA data alone

What does the study reveal about data linkage?

As linkage between these two administrative datasets had not been previously attempted, there was no 'road map' about what steps were required, what each step would involve, or the time it would take. The process took approximately eighteen months, leaving eight days to complete analysis in a secure data environment.

As the datasets do not share a common identification number, linkage was achieved using date of birth, gender and local authority at the time the child became looked after in 2012-13.

Researchers used 1,834 records from CLAS and 1,396 records from SCRA. Based on whether children had ever had a Supervision Requirement recorded in the CLAS data in 2012-13, it was expected that records for 1,287 (70%) of the 1,834 children would match to a SCRA record. It was also expected that all 1,396 children with SCRA records would match to their respective CLAS records, with the exception of 12 pairs of children where it was not possible to identify whether these children were twins. Ultimately, three quarters (976, 76%) of the 1,287 CLAS records matched as expected, whilst one quarter (311, 24%) did not. This left 396 of the 1,396 SCRA records that did not match to a CLAS record.

Where a match was possible between SCRA and CLAS, children had two records. Where a match was not made, children had just one record. Overall, there were 2,230 children in the dataset, some with one record and some with two records. Around two thirds (67%) of the 2,230 children had records which matched as expected (i.e. they had a Supervision Requirement in the CLAS data and matched to SCRA records, or did not have a Supervision Requirement and did not match to SCRA records).

Records of around one third (33%) of children were unable to match, or matched unexpectedly. This included children with shared linkage characteristics (local authority, gender and date of birth). As researchers were unable to identify if these children were twins they were excluded from the analysis. It is likely that some children with SCRA only (396) and CLAS only (311) data are the same children. However, inconsistencies between details in the children's CLAS and SCRA records prevented their successful match and it was not possible to identify which of the records contained inaccuracies.

In the final linked sample of 1,000 children, there was at least one child from 31 local authorities. There were large variations across local authorities in the rate at which the records matched as expected from 54% to 97%. This means some local authorities will be better represented than others and for some local authorities there are potentially high rates of missed matches as a result of inaccurate records. It is important that the data collected is accurate to plan and evaluate services. The variation evident is likely to have implications for planning and evaluating services

What did the linkage show?

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 becoming looked after in 2012-13.

For the 1,000 children, the average length of time it took children from first referral to SCRA to becoming looked after in their 2012-13 CLAS record was 12 months. There was variation by local authority in the average time from first referral to SCRA to becoming looked after: the shortest time was four months, the longest was just under two years.

Another strand of the *Permanently Progressing?* study interviewed 160 decision makers. 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.

Implications for policy and practice

- Linkage of CLAS and SCRA data was possible, but time consuming and complex. Common identification numbers for each looked after child would simplify the process of linking data about each child's life. However, children who are looked after away from home using Section 25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and not referred to the Reporter will not appear in the SCRA data
- Given the considerable variation in rates of linkage, 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 that data needs to be accurate if it is to be used by policymakers and practitioners to plan and evaluate services.
- Early engagement, and timely interventions are a core aspect of *Getting it right for every child*. The linkage showed that before children became looked after in 2012-13, professionals had referred them to the Reporter. Research into that stage of decision making would be valuable.

About this study

This briefing paper is based on research by:

- Jade Hooper, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling
- Dr Linda Cusworth, Law School, Lancaster University
- Dr Helen Whincup, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling

Phase One of the *Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland* project was funded by a legacy. This longitudinal study explores experiences and outcomes for children looked after aged five and under in Scotland who go on to be placed permanently away from their birth parents. Phase One was a collaboration between the Universities of Stirling, York, and Lancaster, and Adoption and Fostering Alliance (AFA) Scotland. If citing this research, please reference the following paper: *Linking two administrative datasets about looked after children: testing feasibility and enhancing understanding*. Published by the University of Stirling, First Edition: June 2019. ISBN: 978-1-908063-50-2

Contact

Dr Helen Whincup

Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Stirling

✉ helen.whincup@stir.ac.uk

Additional Reference

Scottish Government (2015) Looked After Children Data Strategy. Edinburgh; Scottish Government.

September 2019