

SOCIAL WORK OVER TIME

PROJECT SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

Research team: Jonathan Scourfield, Sin Yi Cheung & Meng Le Zhang, Cardiff University; Elaine Sharland, University of Sussex; Morag Henderson, UCL Institute of Education; Paula Holland, Lancaster University



Social Work over Time

Introduction

The Social Work over Time Project looks at social work service users in the general population and examines the outcomes of children whose families have had social work contact in the past. The project is one of only a few that have examined social work service users using large scale longitudinal studies. These studies were the British Household Panel Survey; Longitudinal Study of Young People in England; Millennium Cohort Study; and the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children.

Using information from these longitudinal datasets it has been possible to shed light on the sorts of problems that social work service users face, as well as the long-term outcomes for children in families who have social worker contact. Using the wealth of information contained in each of these studies, it is possible to compare the outcomes of families who have social workers with those of other families who have apparently similar circumstances.

Families and social work contact

One aim of the project was to examine what types of families were likely to have had contact with social workers. We found that a large range of adversities and challenging life circumstances were linked to the receipt of social work contact. Individuals who were single, divorced, or separated were more likely to receive social work input than married individuals. Those who reported poorer health, physical disabilities, caring responsibilities or depression were also more likely to have contact with social workers. In addition, individuals who did not like their neighbourhoods, who rented rather than owned their homes, or who had recently experienced homelessness had a higher chance of receiving contact from social workers.

It is possible that in many cases factors like poor health and depression were not the factors that led people to receive social work contact in the first instance. For example, depression could be an effect of the problems that first caused families to receive social



work. This project was concerned to identify types of adversities associated with receiving social work contact in the first place. We found strong evidence that, over time, episodes of homelessness and divorce or separation were associated with mothers receiving social work contact. Also, over time, families with boys up to age 5 were more likely to receive social work contact than families with girls in the same age group.

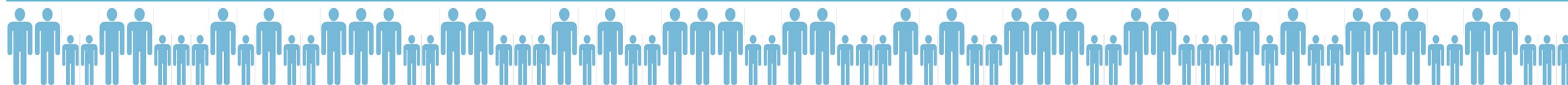
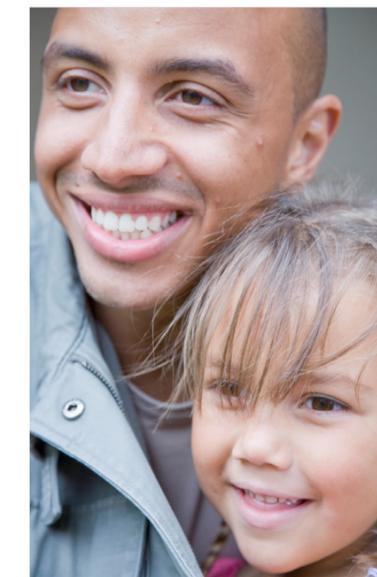
Using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, it was possible to study teenagers who had been in contact with social workers due to their

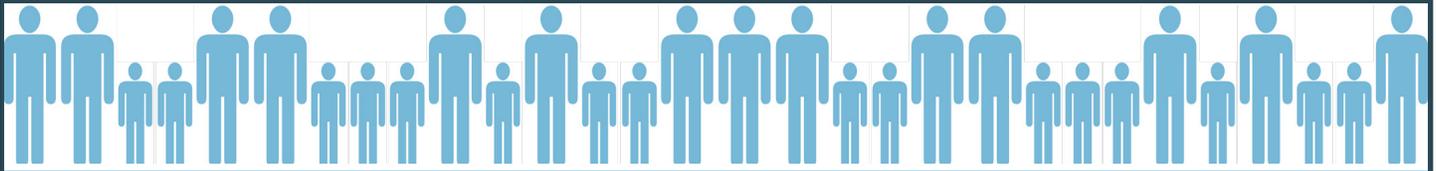
problem behavior. In this age group we found that girls were more likely than boys to have had social work contact. In addition, teenagers who were mixed race, had special needs, or were from families with a lower socioeconomic status were more likely to have social work contact. Poor child-parent relationships, the young person's contact with the police and truancy were also associated with a higher likelihood of social work contact.

Outcomes for families and children who had social work contact

In general families and children who had some contact with social workers had worse outcomes than those who did not. We found this even when we compared families and children with social work contact to apparently similar individuals who did not receive social work contact. Parents in families who had contact with social workers reported worse mental health outcomes for themselves, and poorer well-being for their children. Teenagers who had social work contact also tended to have lower GCSE exam scores than similar teenagers in apparently similar circumstances. There was no strong evidence that teenagers with social work contact had poorer mental health outcomes or lower aspirations to go to university, but they were less confident about being accepted into university should they apply.

cont.





We need to take great care when interpreting these findings. They do not necessarily mean that social work contact is ineffective or even harmful. Even though the studies we used contain a wealth of information on individuals and families, they are based on self report and they tell us relatively little about the nature, quality, amount or reasons for social work contact. They also do not cover everything, in particular only the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children includes information on severe adversities, such as family violence or harm to children. It is plausible that poorer outcomes for those that had social work contact merely reflects their high levels of vulnerability that were not captured by the studies used.

Social work is specifically targeted at vulnerable individuals and families. So it is not surprising that social work users would have poorer outcomes. However the question remains as to whether social work contact and support can improve these outcomes over time. In our study we did not find evidence that improvements in mental health and wellbeing were greater for children and families with social work contact than for those without. However, we need better longitudinal data on social work interventions to explore this further.



For further details about the Social Work over Time project, please contact **Jonathan Scourfield**, scourfield@cardiff.ac.uk

More information is also available at
<http://socialworkovertime.weebly.com>

