

Study shows huge postcode disparity in proportion of children in care

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Children in the poorest areas of the UK are at least 10 times more likely than those in the most affluent to become involved in the child protection system, according to a report by seven British universities. It finds 'strong social gradients' in the rates of intervention across the UK: a step increase in neighbourhood deprivation increases a child's chances of being either taken into care or on a child protection plan by around a third.

A study by seven British universities has revealed significant inequalities in child welfare across the UK, with [children](#) in the poorest areas at least 10 times more likely than those in the most affluent to become involved in the child protection system.

Researchers found 'strong social gradients' in the rates of intervention across the four countries, with each step increase in neighbourhood deprivation bringing a significant rise in the proportion of children either 'looked after' in care (LAC) or on a [child protection](#) plan (CPP).

Academics from the universities of Coventry, Sheffield, Huddersfield, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Stirling and Queen's University Belfast were funded by the Nuffield Foundation to investigate data on over 35,000 children who are either LAC or on CPPs – over 10% of all such cases open in March 2015, when the study began.

The Child Welfare Inequalities Project's findings, which are revealed at a conference in London today, show that:

- children in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in the UK are at least 10 times more likely to be in care than children in the least deprived 10%;
- across the UK, each step increase in deprivation brings a rise of around a third in a child's chances of being in care;
- in all countries children are over-represented in the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods, particularly so in Northern Ireland;
- around one in 60 children is in care in England's most deprived neighbourhoods, compared with one in 660 in the least deprived area;
- in the most deprived neighbourhoods in England, LAC rates for white children were five times higher than for Asian children and 75% higher than for black children.

The study drilled down below local authority level in all of the four countries, revealing that children living in equivalent neighbourhoods – whether highly deprived or not – in different LAs have starkly different chances of being in care, with low deprivation LAs around 50% more likely to intervene.

Although it was beyond the scope of the study to analyse why this was the case, the researchers say the likely explanation is that – relative to demand – more deprived LAs have fewer resources to allocate to children's services.

Researchers also spoke with [local authorities](#) and frontline social work professionals about how decisions around individual children and families were made. Poverty was often treated as a 'taken for granted' backdrop of practice, rather than a key focus of work to support families.

Many staff across the UK reported feeling 'overwhelmed' by the

complex level of need they encountered in families, and did not feel that they had the power to change the inequalities that they saw.

Lead investigator Paul Bywaters, professor of social work at Coventry University, said:

"This is not about pointing the finger at local authorities or apportioning blame to anyone for a situation that is in critical need of attention. What we're doing is holding up a mirror to the child welfare sector, and to the UK's governments, and saying 'This is how it is – now what shall we do about it?'.

"We've known for years that child abuse and neglect is linked to poverty, but there's been a fundamental gap in our understanding of how a child's family circumstances, and neighbourhood deprivation or locality impacts their chances of the state intervening to improve their life chances. This is partly because, extraordinarily, no data is systematically collected and published about the socio-economic background of the families whose children are involved with the child welfare system. Our study puts in place some strong foundations to build on and change that.

"Our ultimate aim is to make reducing inequalities in [child welfare](#) a key policy objective, in the same way that tackling inequalities in health and education have been prioritised in recent years. With further austerity measures and fundamental changes to local government financing on the horizon, time is very much of the essence in tackling this most vital of social issues."

Provided by Coventry University

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