

Fewer children in social care in Northern Ireland than rest of UK, according to new report

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Professor Paul Bywaters. Credit: University of Huddersfield

NEW research has uncovered massive differences in children's social care between the four countries of the UK, with Northern Ireland

emerging as the territory where young people are much less likely to be fostered or taken into residential care. This is despite the fact that the province has the UK's biggest percentage of children living in deprived areas.

Now the researchers—headed by a University of Huddersfield professor—are investigating the reasons for Northern Ireland's lower rates and the lessons that can be learned. Policy makers should be profoundly interested in the findings, states Paul Bywaters in a new online article.

He is Professor of Social Work at Huddersfield and a leader of the Child Welfare Inequalities Project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and involving experts based at seven UK universities. They include Professor Brid Featherstone, who is Head of the Department of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Huddersfield.

Latest outputs from the project include a co-authored article titled Child welfare inequalities in the four nations of the UK that appears in the *Journal of Social Work*. Professor Bywater has also written Country matters: inequalities in children's social care, appearing on the CommunityCare website for the [social work](#) profession.

The article, includes statistics which show that in Northern Ireland, 48 children out of every 10,000 living in the most deprived areas are looked after in foster or residential care. The equivalent figures for England, Wales and Scotland are 112, 135 and 188 respectively.

Figures also indicate that children in Northern Ireland are more likely to be on the child protection register—meaning they stay with their families—than to be looked after away from their homes.

"We don't yet understand the reasons for these large differences, which

do not seem to be the focus of government interest. It is clear that within each country [family](#) economic circumstances and ethnicity are the most significant factors, but between the four UK countries other factors must be at work," writes Professor Bywaters.

Children's social care—variations

Professor Bywaters analyses different legal and [social care](#) systems around the UK—including Scotland's Children's Hearing system—but adds that "there may be something different about the strengths of families and communities in the four countries, with local solidarity and resistance to state involvement in family life perhaps greatest in Northern Ireland."

Professor Bywaters writes that the UK's cross-country inequalities mostly matter because "decisions to separate children from their families or keep them together reverberate through the rest of their lives and the lives of their siblings, parents and grandparents."

"Partly in response to our findings, Glasgow has embarked on a radical culture change which is already significantly reducing the numbers of children in residential and foster care and rebalancing services towards family support," continues Professor Bywaters, adding that there are also economic reasons why policy makers and professional leaders should want to understand the inequalities.

"We estimate that if other countries had Northern Ireland's rates... there would be around 40 per cent fewer looked after children in England, 50 per cent fewer in Wales and 60 per cent fewer in Scotland. In England, this equates to around £1.6 billion per year, which could be available to spend on keeping families safe and together, just under 20 per cent of the total children's services budget."

The Child Welfare Inequalities team is now examining whether practice on the front line in Northern Ireland and the family and community context is significantly different from that in the other countries and it aims to report on this by end of the year, writes Professor Bywaters.

But he adds that: "Cross country comparisons are bedevilled by inadequate data systems which do not easily transfer across national borders. So it is the four UK governments that need to take a lead."

More information: Paul Bywaters et al, Child welfare inequalities in the four nations of the UK, *Journal of Social Work* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1468017318793479](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017318793479)

Provided by University of Huddersfield

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