

Computer system fails the children it was designed to protect

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Just days after the head of Ofsted, Christine Gilbert, promised an overhaul of child protection inspection services in the wake of the death of Baby P, a new study claims that the IT-based procedures used by staff working at the 'front door' of local authority children's services could be putting the very children which they are designed to help at increased risk.

Research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), involved a two year study of front line children's services in five local authorities in England and Wales. It was carried out by The University of Nottingham, Lancaster University, Cardiff University and The University of Huddersfield. The results are due to be published in the *British Journal for Social Work* early in the New Year.

Researchers say the computer system — the Integrated Children's System (ICS) — set up to standardise procedures and micro-manage decisions has the potential to undermine good social work practice. The need to spend more and more time inputting data into overly complex assessment forms and the pressure to take short-cuts in order to meet inflexible deadlines create, what the researchers call, "latent conditions for error".

The Study claims that changes brought in by the Laming Report in 2003 — following the death of Victoria Climbié — together with on-going resource constraints have served to further burden front-line workers already under heavy pressure in busy offices.

Latent conditions for error, the researchers say, may have limited adverse influence where staffing levels were good. However, in situations of high referral rates, inexperienced staff, turnover or sickness, they will become increasingly dangerous.

David Wastell, Professor of Information Systems at The University of Nottingham said: "ICS is a crude technological attempt to transform social work into a bureaucratic practice to be governed by formally defined procedures, involving sequences of tasks to be accomplished within strict deadlines."

The researchers say that the case of Baby P illustrates the paradoxes of the inspection regime and many of the unintended consequences of audit. The "tactical behaviours" criticised by the Ofsted head are not aberrations of the audit regime but are systemic adaptations directly produced by it.

Social work is quite different from teaching and cannot be observed in the same direct way as classroom performance. The researchers are concerned that Ofsted have only now considered the validity of their inspectorial methods.

The study focused on five local authority areas, a London borough, a county council, a metropolitan borough in the North of England, a unitary authority and a Welsh rural authority. It is estimated that researchers spent around 240 days observing and analysing everyday practice. This included work interactions and meetings, the inspection of key documents and case files. In addition the study ran ten focus groups and carried out 60 formal interviews.

Professor David Wastell from The University of Nottingham Business School, who specialises in public service innovation and believes in the critical importance of user centred design, said: "As far as I can see, the

development of ICS has been driven from the top down, by central government, with minimal design input from the social work profession, front-line practice in particular. The architects of ICS seem to have been convinced that it was the correct approach and pressed ahead regardless of warning signals from pilot trials".

The Study sought to examine how social work practice has been affected by New Labour's programme of modernisation. It has focused on patterns of error and the attribution of blame in professional decision making. Researchers paid special particular attention to the initial handling of referrals to Children's services as this work is particularly subject to bureaucratic-style procedures and exacting performance targets.

Source: University of Nottingham

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