

Research sheds light on evolving and multifaceted demand for children's social care services

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Research led by Kingston University and the National Children's Bureau has uncovered an unprecedented picture of national demand for

children's social care services in England.

The study examined the relationship between assessed [risk factors](#), social care intervention and educational outcomes, offering a unique evidence-based picture of how the support and interventions for children and families have changed over time and the impact that these have had on children's outcomes.

Social workers record any combination of 40 common risk factors when they carry out a child and family assessment. However, until now, little has been known about what combinations are most prevalent for which children, and how children's characteristics and needs affect what happens after an assessment is completed.

The two-year quantitative study categorized 3.6 million social care assessments and linked these to a range of social care and education outcomes, including [child protection](#) and care interventions, re-referrals and re-entries to care, school exclusions, and educational attainment.

Researchers, including Kingston University Professor of Social Work Rick Hood, identified 12 categories of demand representing the most common combinations of risk factors assessed by [social workers](#), which can now be used by local authorities as a way to better understand the challenges facing their [local population](#) and adapt service provision accordingly.

Further analysis explored how outcomes differed based on children's characteristics, their category of need, and the type of provision they received.

[The report](#) found:

- Single-factor domestic abuse and violence was found to be the

most prevalent category of demand, accounting for a fifth of all cases

- The proportion of children assessed with multiple risk factors increased from 2014–2021, with a disproportionate rise in those affected by child [mental health problems](#), extra-familial harm, and complexities around parental mental health
- A combination of concerns about parental mental health and concerns about either alcohol or drug misuse was the second most prevalent form of demand
- Average rates of re-referral were 30% over 12 months and 59% over six years. For some categories of demand, these rates were significantly higher and children in more complex categories of demand were more likely to be re-referred and to have a repeat child protection plan
- Children in the "risks outside the home" category were more likely to be older, male and/or Black, and accommodated in care and less likely to have a child protection plan than the average child assessed by children's social care
- Children at risk of domestic violence and abuse were more likely to have a child protection plan if assessed with other risk factors, particularly neglect.

Professor Hood said the study was a milestone in the sector. "This study represents the largest and most comprehensive analysis of data on social work assessments carried out so far in England. We hope our findings will help local authorities understand demand and match services to what children and families need in order to thrive and meet their potential," he said. "There is an absence of sufficient resources available to address the variety of demand meaning many children will not receive the right kind of help early enough and end up returning into the system later in life," he added.

The report has also called on policymakers and local services to respond

to the findings through:

- An increased role for, and investment in, youth services and child and adolescent mental health services to prevent a rise in numbers of young people with complex needs
- Better training for practitioners that acknowledges complex links between social and economic circumstances and racial and ethnic disparities in assessment
- Enacting social policies that improve financial and socioeconomic circumstances of families.

A parent from the National Children's Bureau's Families Research Advisory Group, which helped shape the research, saw their son receive support from social care services that allowed him to shape his future and enable him to reach his potential in higher education. "I hope this research helps local authorities to anticipate the needs of young people so that more families, like mine, can have a positive experience of support."

Strategic Director for External Affairs at the National Children's Bureau Phil Anderson said the research provides new evidence on the need for more investment in mental health services. "This study provides new evidence on which to base services that address the needs of the whole child and their family, so they receive the help they need as early as possible, and supports the case for a significantly increased investment in [child](#) and adolescent mental health services as well as improved training for practitioners."

As part of the project [local authorities](#) in England are being encouraged to undertake their own demand analysis, using tools available on the [project website](#) to inform [strategic decisions](#) and the design of local children's services.

More information: Studying the outcomes of different types of demand in children's social care. www.kingston.ac.uk/faculties/f...ildrens-social-care/

Provided by Kingston University, London

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