

Research Snapshot

Contact with the child protection system and children's development



Background

Experiences of abuse and neglect during important stages of early childhood have been demonstrated to have pervasive impacts on children's development, with a breadth of evidence to indicate detrimental effects on early brain development, cognitive functioning and psychosocial outcomes [1]. Longitudinal research has also shown child abuse and neglect to have significant lasting effects on a range of outcomes across the life course including poorer physical and mental health, lower educational attainment, lower rates of employment, increased alcohol and substance abuse, homelessness and criminality [2-4]. Traditionally, research into child abuse and neglect has focused primarily on the most severe cases of abuse and neglect, and this has provided consistent findings regarding the link between experiences of abuse and neglect and poorer development outcomes.

In Australia, anyone who works with children directly or indirectly through their families is required to notify their state or territory's child protection agency of any concerns they have for the wellbeing or safety of a

child. Researchers refer to these notifications to child protection agencies as child protection 'contacts'. Child protection system contacts range in severity, reflecting the degree of risk of harm to a child. That is they range from children having one notification of a concern that is not considered to pose an imminent risk to a child and does not result in an agency investigation of the allegation, to an allegation being investigated, substantiated and the child being placed in out of home care (OOHC). Child protection agencies across Australia are managed by state and territory governments and each uses its own system to assess and classify risk to the child.

Recently, the use of linked administrative data has provided further insight into the relationship between the risk categories or 'severity of child protection contacts' in early childhood, and the developmental outcomes of these children at entry into formal schooling. In South Australia, recent research has highlighted the significant number of notifications to child protection, with data indicating that one in four children will have a notification to the child protection system by age ten,

with nearly half of these notifications occurring before three years of age [5]. This research has further indicated that the number of children notified to child protection has also consistently increased by around 2% annually since 1999, reaching 15% in 2011 [5]. Despite the enormity of reports to child protection for suspected abuse and neglect, it has been identified that close to 80% of these children will not receive a formal response from the child protection system [5]. That is, many children and families notified to the child protection system receive no follow up contact from the child protection agency; with a legal investigation (commonly referred to as a statutory response) limited to cases considered most severe. In part this is due to the capacity of child protection agencies, with most stretched to reach even the most concerning cases. A lack of response to identified early concerns represents a significant lost opportunity for prevention, and underscores the importance of a public health approach for understanding this social issue at a population level.

Aim

The aim of this research snapshot is to summarise recent Australian research that has used linked population data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to examine the relationship between contact with the child protection system and children's developmental outcomes at school entry.

Key findings

Child protection contact and children's development

Recent collaborative efforts in the linkage of large government datasets in both South Australia and New South Wales has afforded researchers the ability to take a whole-of-government approach in describing how children move through the child protection system, and the relationship this has with children's development. Research using data from the South Australian Early Childhood Data project (SA-ECDP) has not only demonstrated the immense scale of child protection reporting in South Australia, but also revealed that increasing levels of contact with the child protection system are associated with increasingly poorer developmental outcomes. The SA linked data demonstrated that children with a notification to the child protection system were twice as likely to be vulnerable on one or more domains of the AEDC (35.9%), compared to children who had no contact with the child protection system (17.7%) [5]. At the acute end of the spectrum, children who were placed in OOHC were three times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable (52.9%) compared to children with no contact with the child protection system [5].

Similarly, in New South Wales, the analysis of linked child

protection and AEDC data found strong links between child protection contact and developmental vulnerability at school entry. This research also demonstrated that children with escalating statutory levels of contact with the child protection system were far more likely to be start school behind their peers, finding children with a substantiated (investigated and confirmed) case of abuse or neglect to have a far greater likelihood of being developmentally vulnerable or at risk across the five AEDC domains [6, 7].

While studies from both states have found greater rates of developmental vulnerability with increasing child protection contact, there were some differences between the jurisdictions in the prevalence of developmental vulnerability for children with substantiated concerns who remained at home or were moved to OOHC. For example, research in SA found similar rates of vulnerability for children in OOHC and those who remained with their families, while research in NSW found that children in OOHC had a slightly lower likelihood of developmental vulnerability in some domains of development (Physical Health and Wellbeing, Language and Cognitive Skills (school based) and Communication and General Knowledge), relative to the likelihood of developmental vulnerability for children who had a substantiated report of child abuse and neglect and had been not placed in OOHC [7]. Being able to compare jurisdictions is an opportunity to compare the effectiveness of different policies, resourcing and practices. Unfortunately the definitions used for the different tiers of child protection contact are not consistent across jurisdictions, so caution is warranted when drawing conclusions.

In Western Australia, research using linked child protection and AEDC data also found strong evidence to suggest poorer development across a range of AEDC domains for children notified to the child protection system, with a similar level of risk found for children regardless of whether the report was substantiated or non-substantiated [8]. The research further demonstrated that children who had reports of neglect and physical abuse, regardless of whether the report was substantiated, had the greatest likelihood of poorer outcomes across a range of cognitive and non-cognitive domains of the AEDC [8].

Implications

For policy and practice

Research has demonstrated that one in four children in South Australia will have had a notification to child protection by age ten years, however only around 20% of these children will receive a response from child protection. This research has shown that any contact with the child protection system is associated with poorer outcomes across a range of developmental domains at school entry. As such, it can be strongly argued that greater importance must be placed on early intervention

to prevent child abuse and neglect, with support provided to families irrespective of whether or not a notification reaches a statutory threshold. Moreover, the research has demonstrated the importance of acting upon concerns outside of the statutory child protection system, by connecting with families we know to be experiencing challenges early in the life of their children.

Research has demonstrated a need for policy responses and resources provided to the whole population, proportionate to the level of need. Policies aimed at providing both universal and targeted services for children and families across the spectrum of child protection concerns are necessary for reaching children and families for whom there are concerns but are not currently receiving a response from child protection services.

For research

While further research is needed to determine the factors that have led to such a large proportion of Australian children being the subject of a notification to child protection, existing research has provided considerable evidence regarding the relationship between child protection notifications and poorer development outcomes at school entry. Children in the child protection system often have contact with a range of other government and non-government agencies throughout early childhood, with the continued linkage of administrative datasets likely to provide additional rich data regarding the early life environments of these children. As such, an important line of future research will be evaluating how the child protection system intersects with other agencies, to better inform policies to support families and improve the developmental outcomes of children facing substantial early life adversity.

For further information

About research snapshots

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