Looked after children in Scotland: Complex lives, complex solutions
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Research conducted by Dr Gillian Henderson, Indiya Kurlus, Donald Lamb (SCRA), Dr Ruth Woods
Outline

• Complexity in child protection
  • Children’s lives
  • Policy

• The research
  • Tracking change over time

• Findings
  • Children’s lives
  • Policy in practice
  • Unintended consequences
Complexity in child protection

- Child protection as a complex system
- Cause and effect embedded in complicated networks
- Reduced predictability
- Unintended consequences
Complexity in child protection: Children’s lives

- Attainment gap
- Lengthy paths to permanence
  - Majority waited over 4 years (Henderson et al., 2011)
Complexity in child protection: Policy

- Getting it Right for Looked After Children and Young People: Early engagement, early permanence and improving the quality of care (Scottish Government, 2015)

- Early permanence: ‘We want to secure early permanence for as many as possible of those who do become looked after.’ (p.6)
Complexity in child protection: Policy

• Getting it Right for Looked After Children and Young People: Early engagement, early permanence and improving the quality of care (Scottish Government, 2015)
  • Early intervention: ‘Advocates preventative work and early intervention to support children, young people and their families’ (p.6)

• Out of home care: ‘We expect local authorities to “presume against” looked after at home status when planning interventions’ (p.17)
Complexity in child protection: Policy

• International context

• Policy shifts to earlier permanence across UK, Canada, USA

• Policy shifts to earlier intervention in Australia and Canada
  • Out of home care (OOHC) of young children increasing in Australia, Canada, England
The research

• Aim: To measure and track changes in...

• Complex lives
  • Looked after children’s experiences in first 3 years

• Policy in practice
  • Early permanence
  • Early intervention: Out Of Home Care (OOHC)
The research

- All children under compulsory supervision at some point prior to 3 years of age
  - Random gender-balanced selection from 6 LA areas
  - Excluding siblings
  - Rural and urban areas across Scotland

- 110 children born April 2003 – Jan 2004
  - 55 girls, 55 boys

  - 58 girls, 59 boys
The research

• SCRA staff extracted data from case files:
  • Children’s lives
  • Permanence planning
  • OOHC

• Compared prevalence for 2003 and 2013 cohorts
Findings: Children’s lives

• Problems faced by birth parent(s)
  • 2003 cohort: 7.22
  • 2013 cohort: 8.36
  • 16% increase
Findings: Children’s lives

Problems faced by birth parents

- Financial difficulties
- Mental ill health
- Offending
- Drug abuse
- Alcohol abuse
- Perpetrator of abuse
- Victim of abuse

% of sample

- 2003 cohort
- 2013 cohort

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Findings: Policy in practice

• Early permanence increasing

• Percentage of children in OOHC at 3 years, with permanence plan in place
  • 2003 cohort: 67%
  • 2013 cohort: 83%
Findings: Policy in practice

- Early OOHC increasing
- 30% increase at 3 years
Findings: Unintended consequences

- Implications for family fragmentation

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<th>Separation from biological sibling(s)</th>
<th>Percentage of cohort</th>
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Findings: Unintended consequences

- Combining early out of home care and early permanence
- Babies born into care
Conclusions: Complex lives, complex solutions

• Complex lives
  • Multiple parental problems
  • Increasing over time?

• Complex solutions
  • Increasing early permanence and OOHC

• Unintended consequences
  • Family fragmentation
  • Permanent removal at birth

• Positive and negative effects of policy
To learn more...

- R.woods3@rgu.ac.uk
- Briefing paper
  - CHIP website
- Research published as:
