DISPROPORTIONALITY IN CHILD WELFARE
THE PREVALENCE OF BLACK AND ETHNIC MINORITY CHILDREN WITHIN
THE ‘LOOKED AFTER’ AND ‘CHILDREN IN NEED’ POPULATIONS AND ON
CHILD PROTECTION REGISTERS IN ENGLAND

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Introduction

It has long been known that children from black and mixed ethnic backgrounds are over-represented among children who are looked after, and that Asian children tend to be under-represented. Less is known about why this might be the case, or about over- and under-representation of children at earlier stages such as being identified as ‘in need’ or being placed on the child protection register. This desk-based study was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to provide further insight into differences between ethnic groups in their contact with child welfare services in England, and to examine possible reasons for this. New analyses were conducted on three national datasets (the Children in Need Census, children on the child protection register and children looked after), and looked after children’s care histories were examined to see if over- or under-representation could be explained by factors such as differing rates of entering or leaving care. These analyses were supplemented by a review of relevant research literature.

Key findings

• The patterns of over- and under-representation of black and minority ethnic children among the looked after population are for the most part replicated in the Children in Need Census and on child protection registers (the Children in Need Census includes children who are looked after and those on child protection registers). Children of mixed ethnic background are over-represented in all three categories, and Asian children under-represented in each category. However, although black children are over-represented among children in need in general and among children who are looked after as a specific group, they are not over-represented on the child protection register.

• Children from mixed and black ethnic groups start to become looked after at higher rates than their presence in the population, but all ethnic groups cease being looked after at rates similar to the rate at which they enter care. It therefore seems that differences in rates of starting to be looked after contribute to disproportionalities in the care population, but differences in rates of leaving do not.

1 Separate child protection registers were phased out by April 2008 and replaced by child protection plans (Working Together to Safeguard Children, HM Government 2006).
Once in care, Black Caribbean children are almost twice as likely to experience a placement in residential care compared with Bangladeshi children. This is not simply a feature of age, since the mean age at first entering care is lower for Black Caribbean than for Bangladeshi children.

Overall, 18 per cent of children are returned home to a parent after being in care. Reunification is more common among children from the Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi ethnic groups (between 21 and 23 per cent) than for Chinese, Black African, ‘Other’ and Black Caribbean children (between 9 and 12 per cent).

Children of mixed ethnicity and white British children have the highest rates of adoption from care. Black children and those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin have the lowest.

It is likely that many different factors interact to contribute to the differences shown by the statistical analyses, making it impossible to draw straightforward conclusions.

Aims

The main aims of this study were:

- to undertake new analyses of national and local statistics from England in relation to over- or under-representation of black and minority ethnic children who are looked after;
- to use this analysis, supplemented by a review of findings from relevant published research studies, to provide further insight into possible reasons for any disproportionality;
- to highlight where further research or data collection is needed to address these issues.

Methodology

The study consisted of two parts. The first was an overview of qualitative data from relevant research studies, focusing particularly on research undertaken in the UK but also reviewing findings from key US studies where there has been a strong tradition of research in what has been termed ‘disproportionality’. Literature was identified through searching social care databases, checking references in lists compiled by relevant organizations, and identifying publications from major child welfare studies known to have included significant numbers of minority ethnic children in their research samples.

The second part involved secondary analysis of three separate datasets of child welfare statistics, using unrounded figures supplied by DCSF. These datasets represented children in contact with child welfare services (the Children in Need Census), children subject of a child protection plan (on child protection registers) and children looked after (the SSDA903 annual statistical return). Analyses were carried out at local authority and national level, and figures from more than one year were averaged to increase the underlying sample sizes and make the estimates more reliable.

Longitudinal data recording individual children’s histories in the care system were also examined. A special database was constructed from the SSDA903 statistics on children looked after in the years 2004 to 2006, removing all children recorded as unaccompanied asylum seekers, all episodes of care representing a series of short breaks, and all children with a gap in their care history (due to a period of time when information was only collected on a one-third sample). The final dataset included 479,389 ‘episodes’ of care relating to 121,705 children.

Findings

Area level analysis

Two kinds of local authority level analysis were carried out on each of the three child welfare databases. The first considered any differences in the rate at which children in each ethnic group were ‘in need’, on the child protection register or looked after, compared to their rate in the local population (‘disproportionality’). This controls for some of the effects of area - for example, if black and minority ethnic children are more likely to live in areas of high disadvantage. The analysis showed that on average, children of mixed ethnic groups and black children are over-represented in the child welfare statistics and Asian children are under-represented (see table). The only exception is a slight under-representation of Black children on the Child Protection Register, but this was not significant. Some of these mean disproportionalities are very large: for example, the rate of Asian children on the Child Protection Register was less than one third of the rate that would be expected if they were represented at the same rate as they are in the local authority populations, whilst black children were more than three times more likely to be looked after relative to their rate in the local population. However,
these means mask a lot of local variation. In every case there were local authorities that ran counter to the overall trend, and other local authorities where the disproportionalities were much more extreme than the averages would suggest.

Table: Over and under representation of ethnic groups in child welfare compared to in the population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
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<tr>
<td>Children in Need Census</td>
<td>As expected</td>
<td>Over</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Protection Register</td>
<td>As expected</td>
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<td>A lot under</td>
<td>As expected</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children Looked After</td>
<td>As expected</td>
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(see Table 3 in main report for actual figures)

The second local analysis compared rates of black and other minority ethnic children in the three sets of child welfare statistics with rates for white children living in the same areas ('disparity'). If ethnicity were not a factor, the rates should be the same. A Disparity Index was constructed which showed that:

- Children of mixed ethnicity were, on average, ‘in need’ and on the child protection register at a rate one and three-quarter times the rate for White children in the same area; and their rate amongst looked after children was two and a half times that of White children.

- Black children were deemed to be in need at four times the rate of white children in the same local authorities. They were on the child protection register at the same rate as white children, but they were looked after at a rate three and a half times that of white children. These are averages, not maximums: in some local authorities black children were looked after at more than ten times the rate of white children.

- Asian children, by contrast, were under-represented in all three datasets compared to White children in the same area. Their rate of being children ‘in need’ was just three-quarters the rate for white children, their rate of being on the child protection register was only one-third the rate for white children, and their rate of being looked after was half that of white children in the same local authority.

Analysis of children’s care histories

In addition to the area level analyses, various aspects of children’s pathways into and out of care were examined to see if they might contribute to differences between ethnic groups. These included rates of starting and ceasing to be looked after; age at first entering care; total length of time spent in care (for those in the database who were no longer looked after); type of placement and experiences of adoption or return to parents.

Starting and ceasing to be looked after

Children of mixed and black ethnicity become looked after at higher rates than their presence in the population. These differences in rates of entering care contribute to the observed differences in rates of being looked after. If mixed and black children were ceasing to be looked after at lower rates than they were starting to be looked after, that would also help to account for their over-representation in the care population. Similarly, if Asian children were ceasing to be looked after at higher rates, that would account for their under-representation. But the rates of ceasing to be looked after almost exactly match those of starting to be looked after, so it is not the case that some ethnic groups are ceasing to be looked after at different rates from their rates of entering care. Differences in rates of starting to be looked after thus appear to contribute to disproportionalities in the care population, but differences in rates of leaving care do not.
Age at first entry to care and total time in care

Children from mixed ethnic backgrounds tend to start being looked after at a younger age but also stay in care longer than those from other ethnic groups. This could help to account for why they are disproportionately represented in the looked after population. By contrast, the three black groups are very varied in their average age at first being looked after and in their total length of time in care, so this does not help to explain their over-representation in the national statistics for looked after children. Similarly, the four Asian groups (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Other Asian) have varied ages at first becoming looked after, but they do tend to spend a shorter time in care than most other groups, which might partially account for their under-representation.

Type of care

Fostering is by far the most common type of placement for all ethnic groups. There was little variation by ethnic group in the proportion who have ever experienced a period of foster care, although rates were slightly higher for the mixed ethnic group and lower for Chinese and Asian children. For residential care, however, there were marked differences. Black Caribbean children were far more likely to have experienced a period of care in a children’s home (30 per cent) than were Bangladeshi children (16 per cent).

Reunification and adoption

Overall, 12 per cent of looked after children experienced adoption, and 18 per cent ceased being looked after by returning to their parents. Return to parents varied much more by ethnic group than did being adopted. Children from the Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi ethnic groups were much more likely to be returned to their parents than Chinese, Black African, Black Caribbean children or those categorised ‘Other’. For children from the mixed ethnic groups, the rates of return to their parents were between these two patterns. Turning to adoption, it was mixed ethnicity children and the white British who were the most likely to be adopted.

Messages from the literature

The literature reviewed suggested possible mechanisms for under- or over-representation of black and minority ethnic children in child welfare statistics, such as lack of access to appropriate support services; greater unwillingness in some cultures to report concerns about a child’s safety; and greater uncertainty among child welfare professionals about how to respond appropriately to the needs of minority ethnic families. There was little evidence to support the view that social workers and other child welfare professionals operate different thresholds for different ethnic groups in relation to offering services, or removing children from their parents’ care. Overall, the research reviewed provided no simple answer to the question of why disproportionality and disparity exist.

Research and data needs

The study highlights potentially useful areas for further research. For example, in order to understand why some local authorities are ‘outliers’, with unexpectedly high or low rates of black and minority ethnic children on various child welfare measures, it would be useful to interview local managers and child welfare practitioners. Better data are also needed on ethnicity at each point that children come into contact with child welfare se

Additional Information

The full report (DCSF-RR124) can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Isabella Craig, 4 FL - ARD, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.