Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies

Volume 22
Issue 1 *Sustaining parental well-being at individual, family and societal levels*

2023-01-23

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Recommended Citation

O'Leary, Donna and Lyons, Olive (2023) "Exploring the potential of administrative data for understanding and advancing child protection and family support policy, practice and research in Ireland," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1, Article 5.
doi:https://doi.org/10.21427/HNQJ-BA69
Available at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol22/iss1/5

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Abstract

It is generally understood that administrative data at the level of the individual, family and wider population is fundamental to delivering client centred services which aim to support families and respond to and reduce child abuse. Such data is valuable to policy makers and practitioners and plays an important role in research. The focus of this paper is the potential use of administrative data from statutory family support and child protection and welfare services in Ireland for policy, practice and research. In the context of an evolving legislative and policy framework in Ireland, we provide an overview of the statutory family support and child protection services provided by Tusla, Ireland’s Child and Family Agency. We suggest that this context provides an exceptional opportunity for developing administrative data sets in child protection and welfare and in family support. The benefits and challenges of developing such administrative data sets are discussed. The paper concludes with recommendations for developing and linking administrative data sets to better understand and respond to the needs of children and families presenting to the services.

Introduction

Administrative data refers to data routinely collected by public agencies in their administration of services. Specifically, in Child Protection and Welfare (CPW) and Family Support (FS), administrative data can include information such as demographic characteristics of a child and family, case characteristics, details of referral, service needs and outcomes. In CPW it is widely acknowledged that such data is fundamental to delivering client centred services which aim to reduce maltreatment recurrence and serves as a foundation to improving CPW and social care services (Brownell and Jutte, 2013; Drake and Jonson-Reid, 1999; Fallon et al., 2017; Fluke et al., 2020; Jud et al., 2013; UNICEF, 2020). Therefore, administrative data is central to public health and rights based policies and approaches and could reduce the incidence of child abuse and enhance preventive services (Sethi et al., 2013). While not collected solely for research purposes, anonymised administrative data is a concise way of obtaining data related to the scope and nature of difficulties experienced by families. In addition, gathering anonymised administration data can be used to inform State agencies on the incidence of child abuse referrals (Allnatt et al., 2022; Brownell and Jutte, 2013). Furthermore, such data is already available from a case management perspective and therefore does not create a time or resource burden as it involves extraction of data as opposed to creating a new data system. Most importantly having access to comprehensive administrative data sets means that children and adults do not have to be questioned repeatedly for this information. In addition, staff are not burdened with completing paperwork, survey tools or interviews to capture such information.

Administrative data sets can be anonymised reducing ethical concerns regarding their re-use (Allnatt et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022). Across the four nations of the UK, the Departments for Education collate anonymised individual-level administrative data sets relating to Children in Need and Children Looked After by local authorities. The data sets are those that local authorities are obliged to compile and submit to Government and are the basis for calculating aggregate data and statistics published annually. The anonymised data sets can be accessed by researchers following a permissions process (Scourfield et al., 2019). In addition, under a programme called Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) devised with the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Government established regional centres across the four nations of the UK each with a dedicated centre and team, focusing on research using administrative data from a range of sectors. Each of these centres hosts the Children in Need and Children Looked After data sets and prior to being included within datasets, individual records are assigned an Anonymous Linking Field (ALF) based on an encryption of an individual's health service number to facilitates linkage with other national datasets. Each centre is using the data sets to provide cohort profiles or by linking the data with other social, health and administrative to investigate patterns in service delivery and long-term effects of exposure to risks and adversities in childhood (Emmott et al., 2019; Lee et al, 2022; Allnatt et al., 2022).

When administrative data sets are linked, their potential benefits are enhanced. Linked administrative data sets provide opportunities to develop more complete perspectives of children and families involved with services, increase the likelihood of identifying those served by multiple services and can be used to analyse and evaluate participation across services and sectors (Allnatt et al., 2022; Broadhurst et al., 2021; Cuccaro-Alamin et al., 2021; Foust et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020). The data can be used to measure demand, evaluate policies and inform further developments, thus contributing to rights-based and public health-based approaches to prevention and intervention (Fallon et al., 2017; Soneson et all., 2022). When systematically and regularly collated, administrative data can be used longitudinally to generate trend analysis as well as policy analysis (Emmott et al., 2019; Hurren et al., 2017; McGhee, et al., 2015; O'Leary et al., 2015).

The development of common data sets by different countries enables comparison of national data and facilitates collaboration between Governments to enhance child and family wellbeing. At European level several initiatives have taken place to improve data collection for research purposes (Ntinapogias et al., 2015). Central to these initiatives is the understanding that nationally representative, multisectoral, disaggregated data is essential to identify trends, measure responses, identify gaps in service provision, determine the effectiveness of services and inform policy development (Euro-CAN COST Action, 2022; Meinck et al., 2016; Daly et al., 2015; Jud et al., 2015; Ntinapogias et al., 2015; Sethi et al 2013). Due to differences in policies and administrative data across countries, mechanisms promoted include population or agency surveys for child abuse and neglect using standardised methodology across European countries and across different sectors, services and professional specialties within countries (see O'Leary and Lyons, 2021; Ntinapogias et al., 2015; Jud et al., 2015) and projects in which Ireland has representation, aimed at coordinating and enabling analysis of survey data and administrative data that are routinely collected by state's agencies (Euro-CAN COST Action, 2022).

The absence of service related child and family based data severely limits informed policy and service planning (Foust et al., 2021; Herron et al., 2022; Jud et al., 2015; O'Leary, 2022). According to Foust et al. (2021) it prevents an accurate assessment of root causes of service need and outcomes, limits the identification of those who stand to benefit from the services and restricts the ability to track participants over time. These challenges complicate efforts to evaluate the efficacy and impact of CPW and FS policies and services and more equitably prioritise service improvements (Drake and Jonson-Reid, 1999; Fallon et al., 2017; Foust et al., 2021; Malone and Canavan, 2018, 2021). The resulting lack of transparency compromises aspirations for rights-based and public-health based service provision and prevention efforts.

Drawing on current legislative and policy developments in Ireland, this paper discusses the potential for developing and linking administrative data sets in CPW and in FS. The paper builds on a previous publication that examined prospects for developing a national child maltreatment surveillance system in Ireland (O'Leary and Lyons, 2021). In this paper the authors recognise the necessity for complementary survey and administrative data systems which together would enhance the evidence base for supporting children and families in ways that are effective in responding to needs and which are sustainable. This paper maintains that such developments would build on existing commitments to data collection and advances in the infrastructure and regulatory frameworks. Moreover, this represents a unique and timely opportunity to develop individual-level administrative datasets relating to children and families involved with statutory CPW and FS services in Ireland.

Irish CPW and FS services

In Ireland, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children and providing family support. The current framework for child and family services within Tusla is based on a continuum of responses that encompass Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) services and CPW. PPFS provides a suite of targeted preventative and early intervention services for families with additional needs who require multi-agency intervention, but who do not meet the threshold for referral to the CPW services in accordance with national policies (DCYA, 2017; Tusla, 2013). Reporting of child abuse is mandatory for professionals designated in the national policy (DCYA, 2017). The statutory CPW service is a professional social work driven service that provides safety planning focused on CPW, and incorporates alternative care and permanency planning (Tusla, 2017). The framework for practice relies on the assumption of intersection between PPFS and CPW as services are designed to ensure consistent and integrated pathways that ensure intervention in a preventative and timely manner to support the child and family's needs and enhance the family's ability to meet those needs (Tusla, 2021c; 2022a).

In relation to FS and CPW specifically, wide-ranging evaluations were commissioned by Tusla to examine the implementation and streamlining of the current programme and framework for delivering the PPFS (Malone and Canavan, 2018; Shaw and Canavan, 2018). The evaluations identified positive effects of PPFS on the lives of parents and children involved and found that PPFS was culturally embedded within Tusla (Malone and Canavan, 2018). The review identified the need for better integration between early intervention and prevention services (delivered through interventions called Meitheal and through Child and Family Support Networks) and CPW services (Malone and Canavan, 2018). The researchers concluded also that effective prevention services aimed at achieving improved outcomes for families, children and young people requires integration and collaboration across state departments and professional sectors including health, mental health, disability and education (Canavan et al., 2019; Malone and Canavan, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2018). Shortcomings were identified in relation to data, analysis, and on outcomes and evidence frameworks (Malone and Canavan, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2018).

In CPW, developments in service design in recent years have focused on the standardisation of policies and practices across service areas with a view to delivering consistent and integrated responses to children and families (Tusla, 2021c). In 2019, Tusla adopted Signs of Safety as the national approach to CPW practice (Burns and McGregor, 2019; Turnell and Murphy, 2017; Tusla, 2021a) replacing policies based on the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, 2000; HSE/Tusla, 2009/2014). Since 2021, all CPW services use a single integrated information system to manage child protection and welfare cases, the National Child Care Information System (NCCIS), which systematically captures critical data on children who are the subject of a CPW referral, including children in care (HSE/Tusla, 2009/2014; Tusla, 2021a). That system is being enhanced through the development of a new Tusla Case Management System which has been designed to support management of all Tusla services with a view to improving capability, quality and efficiency through improved sharing of information between relevant professionals (Tusla, 2020). Tusla has established processes for improving the quality of data it maintains by developing procedures for measuring, monitoring and reporting conformance to prescribed data quality standards and implementing continuous data improvement (Tusla, 2020).

It is widely accepted that different types of data collection are required to understand the nature and scope of child abuse and family support needs in order to inform these systems of prevention and intervention (Canavan et al., 2019; Fluke et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2016; UNICEF, 2020). Researchers and those involved in public service provision have been advocating for the systematic development and use of individual-level administrative data-sets to inform policies for families and children in Ireland across a range of domains including FS (Rodriguez et al., 2018), intersections between FS and CPW (Malone and Canavan, 2021), CPW (Furey and Canavan, 2019; O' Leary, 2022; O'Leary and Lyons, 2021; Sethi et al., 2013), services for children and young people (Herron et al., 2022) and homelessness (Culhane, 2016).

Commentators have long expressed concerns that statistics relating to Irish CPW services provide very little scope for analysis of demand and responses within the system or for examining the efficacy of the service in delivering its intended aims (Buckley, 2003, 2012, 2017; Buckley and Burns, 2015; Buckley et al., 2010; Burns and MacCarthy, 2012; Ferguson and O'Reilly, 2001; O'Leary et al., 2013; Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2010; Thorpe, 1997). In 2019, Tusla commissioned a study which examined Irelands' data collection relative to other jurisdictions, which found many similarities across jurisdictions but identified several gaps and made recommendations to improve demographic data e.g. expansion of the classifications of abuse (Furey and Canavan, 2019). Gaps in the evidence base include a lack of evidence on the demographic characteristics of those involved with services, the scope and nature of presenting problems, the prevalence of abuse and reasons for decisions made, outcomes and service pathways (Buckley and Burns, 2015; Furey and Canavan, 2019; O'Leary, 2022b; O'Leary and Lyons, 2021; Whelan, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, the design of the statutory FS services through PPFS has been characterised as fitting within public health approaches to prevention due to the universal acceptance that prevention and early intervention are essential for support and protection (Canavan et al., 2019). Others argue that statutory services for FS are characterised as high-risk strategies due to the focus on targeted interventions for vulnerable or at-risk communities as well as those already in the system (Daly et al., 2015). This is true of the Irish CPW service delivery model which is similar to other Anglophone systems (see O'Leary and Lyons, 2021). There is ample evidence that such strategies respond to a minority of those who experience abuse and difficulties at the family level and that they can reinforce social inequalities in populations because they ignore underlying structural factors and focus on individual responsibility (Featherstone et al., 2014; Lonne et al., 2022; Parton, 2019). However, these strategies are essential in providing services to the populations they serve and as such, there is a moral imperative to demonstrate the scope and nature of demand and responses through the maintenance of individual-administrative data sets which is the central focus of this paper.

In CPW, a recent body of research evidence is beginning to paint a picture of the categorisation and handling of referrals (Whelan, 2018), cases open for child protection and welfare investigations within the child protection agency (Buckley and Whelan, 2018; O' Leary, 2022; O'Leary, 2022a) and longitudinal perspectives on children in state care (O'Leary et al., 2015). The studies provide evidence of the richness of data that is required to be collected by social workers to support decision-making and case-management. Most of this data remains within case records and management systems, but represents a valuable source of information that can be harnessed to conduct meaningful research and evaluation on practice, policy, and the efficacy of the CPW service in responding to the needs of children and families involved (O' Leary, 2022; O'Leary, 2022a; O'Leary and Lyons, 2021; Shaw et al., 2016; Whelan, 2018). However, as the next section describes, advances are being made both in the legislative and policy framework to enhance opportunities for research using administrative data.

The evolving data policy framework in Ireland

A review of current CPW and FS policies finds a common interest in further developing data and evidence to advance policy and improve outcomes for children and families. Under the auspices of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Regional Committee for Europe, the Irish Government has pledged a rights-based and public health approach to reducing the prevalence of child maltreatment (Sethi et al., 2013). This necessitates the development of a systematic system to monitor the prevalence of child abuse in Ireland, which could complement the current high-risk, referral and investigation-oriented approach to prevention (O'Leary and Lyons, 2021).

Recent public and government wide consultations led by the Department for Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) point to the need for better data collection and sharing among state agencies. The first, the Report of Public Consultation on Ireland’s Combined Fifth and Sixth Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, identified the need for more data collection and data sharing in various sectors generally (DCEDIY, 2021). The second, a Report on the Public Consultation on a New Policy Framework for Children and Young People, specifically identified the need to address the dearth of data related to child abuse/maltreatment and causality data to inform robust prevention and early intervention strategies and polices (Herron et al., 2022).

The Irish Government is currently revising its national policy framework for children and young people. It is envisaged that it will incorporate the priorities set out in the EU’s Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021-2024 and the Council of Europe’s Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2022-2027 (Herron et al., 2022). It is anticipated that the framework will also provide for Government departments to work collaboratively with statutory agencies and services, and the community and voluntary sectors to achieve the national outcomes established in a previous strategy, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (DCYA, 2014; Herron et al., 2022). Of note, that previous strategy committed to improve data collection to ensure that the lives of children and their families are better understood (DCYA, 2014). Tusla's current Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-2022 (Tusla, 2017a) highlights the necessity of measuring the work it delivers. The strategy advocates using information to build better and more effective services while being cognisant of consistency and quality in the delivery of well-managed services and effective partnerships with those working to keep children safe from harm (Tusla, 2017a).

DCEDIY has also developed a National Model of Parenting Support Services (DCEDIY, 2022b). The model is premised on the understanding that one of the most effective ways of supporting children is by supporting their parents as reflected in Government duties under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (DCEDIY, 2022b). The Model promotes a more coherent and strategic approach to developing and delivering parenting support services through collaborative working, cohesive planning and service delivery and establishing a cross-government network to share learning and showcase best practice across the civil and public service. The Model identified a general lack of data on demand for, availability of, outputs and outcomes of parenting support services leading to challenges in comparing the level of need with the level of funding, types of services, and quantity of parenting supports available across different areas (DCEDIY, 2022b). A steering group was established to promote a standardised, cross-sector collection of parenting support activity and outcomes data. However, the mechanisms that would deliver this data are not described in the Model (DCEDIY, 2022b). The current Government strategy on domestic and gender based violence (the Third National Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Strategy) calls for a range of data collection strategies including the identification of current gaps in individual-level data and potential data linkage relating to children and adults impacted by policies across government departments (Doyle et al., 2021; FRA, 2014; Government of Ireland, 2022a, 2022b).

Government's Public Service Data Strategy 2019-2023 (DPER, 2019b) and Tusla's Data Management Strategy (Tusla, 2020) espouse the centrality of valid and accessible data to support informed service provision, decision making, policy development, research and accountability and the importance of improved data management, governance and architecture to deliver such quality data (DPER, 2019b; Tusla, 2020). In recent years, the Irish child protection service has invested significantly in improving the data produced and published relating to child protection referrals and the processing of cases (Tulsa, 2020). Building on these developments, the current data management strategy aims to ensure that data captured by Tusla serves the data and information needs of all stakeholders in delivering better outcomes for children, young people, families and communities (Tusla, 2020).

There have been substantial developments in the production of interactive aggregate statistics related to performance activity data for CPW and FS services in Ireland (Tusla, 2022b). In 2022, the Irish Government commissioned a research and data projects on children in care and adults who were in care as children (DCEDIY, 2022a) to respond to a gap in longitudinal research with young people leaving care (Ryan, 2009; Whelan and Smyth, 2022). One aspect of the research is the recent establishment of a joint initiative on Data Linking between Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in Ireland which will facilitate the linking of children in care and school attendance data held by Tusla, with educational data held in the Administrative Data Centre in the CSO (Whelan and Smyth, 2022). The study aims to develop insights into participation in education by child in care of the state.

Currently, that anonymised administrative data that will only be available for analysis by statisticians in CSO.

Simultaneously there have been advances in the legislative and regulatory environment relating to data privacy and data sharing and improvements in relation to electronic record maintenance within Tusla (DPER, 2019a, 2019b; EP and CEU, 2016; HSE/Tusla, 2009/2014; Tusla, 2020, 2021b). National and international advances in privacy protections, data security, infrastructure, governance structures and technological innovations mean that administrative data, previously protected from release, can now be made safe for secondary analysis in ways that are consistent with data regulations and statutory guidelines for child protection and FS (Allnatt et al., 2022; Brownell and Jutte, 2013; Culhane, 2016; Culhane et al., 2017; Department of Health, 1991; EP and CEU, 2016; Lee et al., 2022; Scourfield et al., 2019). Lastly, the Health Information and Quality Authority, the independent statutory authority established to promote safety and quality in the provision of health and social care services for the benefit of the health and welfare of the public in Ireland, is currently revising existing standards for information management for national health and social care data collections (HIQA, 2017; HIQA 2022). These provisions and learning from the current data project between DCEDIY, Tusla and CSO (Whelan and Smyth, 2022) could pave the way to systematically make administrative data available through dedicated research hubs such as those in the UK.

Challenges and opportunities in developing administrative datasets

Scaling up systems to develop and systematically maintain administrative data sets can be challenging. Lessons learned during the development of anonymised data sets serve as resources to address such challenges. As detailed above, the legislative and regulatory frameworks for data protection and research are evolving and this can pose challenges in terms of designing anonymised data sets (Jones et al., 2019). Furthermore, such regulations can be interpreted by gatekeepers in ways that hinder research (Clarke et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017). Those developing the SAIL databank in Wales recommend seeking legal advice to ensure that data protection policies are up to date and comprehensive (Jones et al., 2019). Similarly, ever changing policies for FS and CPW generate methodological challenges related to definitions and the interpretation and classification of presenting characteristics (Fallon et al., 2017; Fallon et al., 2010). But some of these challenges can be countered by providing time and resources to develop deep understanding and clarity about how practitioners record and code information (Green et al., 2015). While administrative data by its nature is readily available, it may be inconsistently maintained and it may be missing important variables (Allnatt et al., 2022; Drake and Jonson-Reid, 1999; Green et al., 2015; Scott and Faulkner, 2019; Soneson et al., 2022). When linking data sets, quality issues related to each individual set and variations in data structure and format can pose challenges for interoperability (Harron et al., 2017).

The administrative data generated by individual FS and CPW systems may contain biases relating to reporting, identification and response policies (Lonne et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2016). Due to the potential of the data being fundamentally skewed, it can produce inaccurate predictions of risk and need and when linked with administrative data from other service domains such as education, welfare, disability, youth policy, health and justice, analytic models that are produced can threaten individual and group rights to non-discrimination (Keddell, 2014, 2019; Lonne et al., 2022). Others argue that when administrative data sets are accurate and large enough, they can include benefits such as breaking down silos, creating large and unbiased samples of populations involved with services, objective measures, comprehensive long-term follow-up, continuous data collection, and relatively low expense (Brownell and Jutte, 2013; Cuccaro-Alamin et al., 2021). They can allow comparison across sub-groups and minority groups and facilitate analysis of service provision and outcomes (Soneson et al., 2022). However, concerns about biases can be offset by combining the evidence generated from analysis of linked individual level- administrative data with data and evidence from policies that incorporate rights-based, public health or social justice approaches which are not stigmatising and focus on alleviating the burden of suffering in the entire population (O'Leary and Lyons, 2021; Daly et al., 2015; Featherstone et al., 2014; Perry, 2009; Reading et al., 2009; Sethi et al., 2013). Such combined approaches are the basis of policies that address the continuum from universal to high-risk responses and which incorporate theoretical tensions based on collectivist or individualist approaches (Daly et al., 2015; Gray and Schubert, 2019; Parton, 2019; Perry, 2009). Current Irish Government FS and CPW strategies and policies could be read as an opportunity to develop just such a response.

Jones et al.. (2019) note the importance of public engagement to develop public trust in anonymised data sets because public views about data sharing are complex. This principle is central to the Irish governments current data legislation and strategy (DPER, 2019a, 2019b). As administrative data sets were not initially designed for research, they require considerable manipulation and statistical expertise to prepare them for analysis and research (Allnatt et al., 2022;. Brownell and. Jutte, 2013; Green et al., 2015). However, they are of benefit in responding to longstanding deficits in the evidence base (Hurren et al., 2017. Researchers note the necessity of funded cross-disciplinary teams to work on data preparation, technical supports, data analysis and research design and capacity building (Foust et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2019; Jud et al., 2015).

Concluding comments

The framework for the delivery of statutory FS and CWP service delivery encompasses public health and rights-based approaches through a continuum of services which recognise the inseparable links between children’s circumstances and family’s experiences. These approaches focus on underlying determinants of risk and need which in turn necessitate the maintenance of disaggregated administrative data for purposes of analysis. In Ireland, most of the data collected by individual statutory social workers and FS workers remains unused beyond individual case management. This paper described the opportunities and challenges for developing large-scale data sets for research and policy making in CPW and FS. An examination of the current Irish child protection and welfare and family support and data management policies outlined how individually and collectively they espouse the centrality of valid and accessible data to support informed service provision, decision making, policy development, research and accountability. It is our view that these policies, as they build on existing commitments to data collection and advances in the infrastructure and regulatory frameworks, represent a unique and timely opportunity to develop individual-level administrative data sets relating to children and families involved with statutory CPW and FS services. It is our hope and our recommendation that the commitments relating to data will be resourced to systematically develop administrative data sets for research purposes relating to children and families involved with CPW and FS in Ireland. Furthermore, it is recommended that a partnership model is realised to create dedicated multidisciplinary research hubs involving collaboration between Government and state agencies such as Tusla, Central Statistics Office and university partners. Doing so will enable an understanding of service demand and responses, facilitate research to evaluate current polices and inform future developments, all of which aim to improve outcomes for children and families who are involved with CPW and FS services.

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