



Child Welfare
Inequalities Project



Understanding Child Welfare Inequalities

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Child Welfare Inequalities

Aim: to identify and begin to understand the causes of inequalities in child welfare.

Key questions:

- How unequal are children's chances of abuse and neglect and what are the factors that lie behind those inequalities?
- What is the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect?
- Are different groups of children affected differently?
- Does practice reduce, reflect or reinforce inequalities?

Child Welfare Inequalities

Child welfare inequity occurs when children and/or their parents face unequal **chances, experiences** or **outcomes** of involvement with child welfare services that are systematically associated with structural social disadvantage and are unjust and avoidable.

(Bywaters, et al., 2015)

Child Welfare Inequalities

1. Review of the association between poverty & CAN
2. Examination of the relationship between CPP or LAC rates with area level measures of deprivation (UK)
3. Mixed methods case studies of social work decision making & practice

Child Welfare Inequalities



The relationship between
poverty, child abuse and
neglect: an evidence review

Paul Bywaters, Lisa Bunting, Gavin Davidson, Jennifer Harratty,
Will Mason, Claire McCartan and Nicole Steels

This report examines evidence on two key aspects of the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect: how poverty affects a child's chance of being abused or neglected, and the impact abuse or neglect in childhood has on poverty in adult life.

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Strong evidence of an association between families' socio-economic circumstances and the chances that their children will experience CAN

Evidence of this association is found repeated across developed countries, types of abuse, definitions, measures and approaches

Evidence base in UK is weaker

No data is collected by UK governments on the socio-economic circumstances of families in which children are or have been at risk of significant harm

Quasi-experimental studies



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Shook & Testa (1997): Families receiving cash assistance less likely to experience child removal in the subsequent 15 month period than those who did not.

Fein & Lee (2003): Statistically significant increases in substantiated child neglect cases for families signed up to the harsher welfare programmes.

Cancian et al., 2013): Even modest income differences (approx. \$100 PM) led to 10% decreases in the likelihood of maltreatment reports.

Raissian & Bullinger (2016): \$1 increase in the minimum wage implies a statistically significant 9.6% decline in neglect reports.

Child Welfare Inequalities



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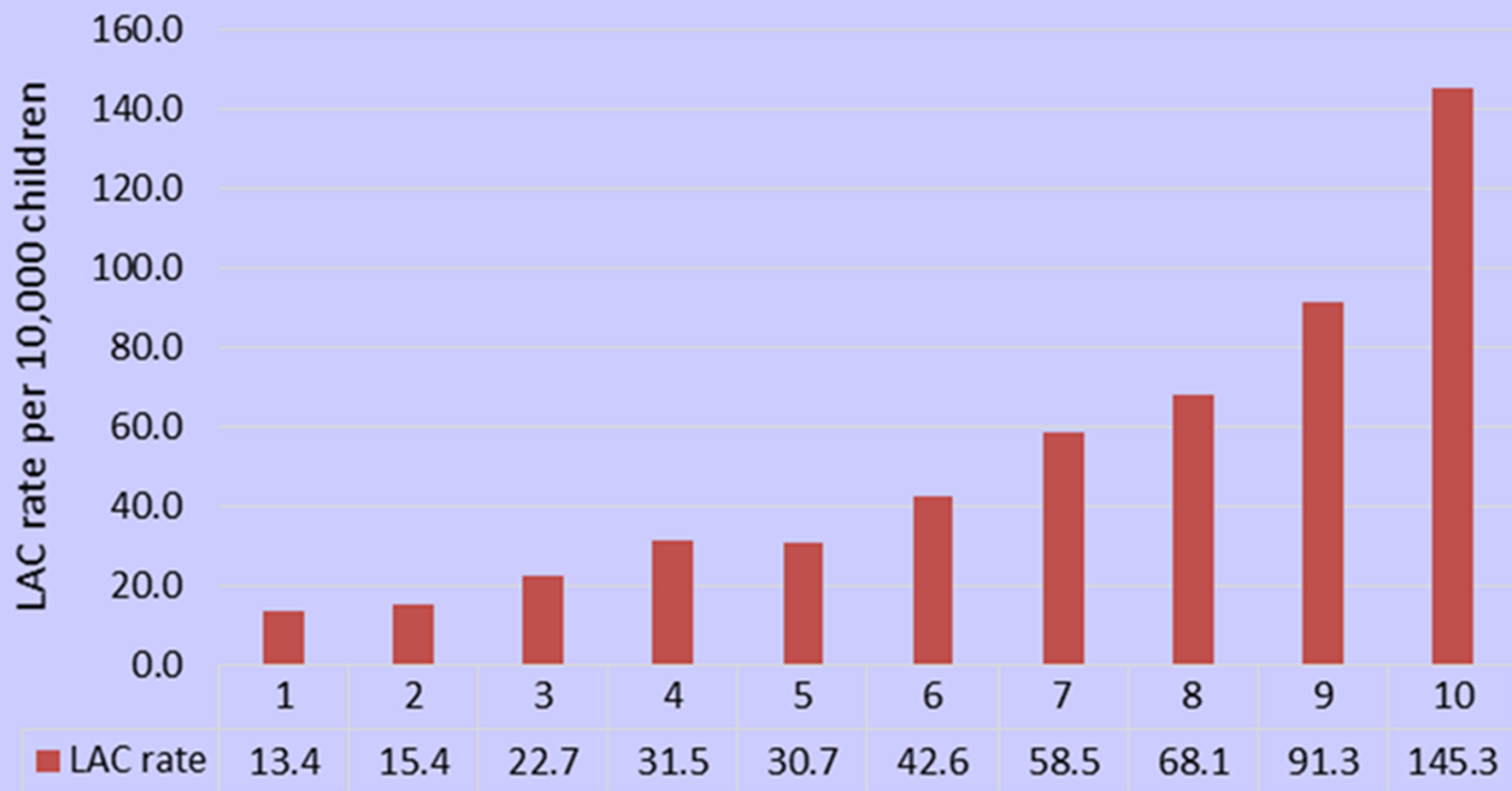
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Reducing child poverty is likely to reduce the extent and severity of child abuse and neglect.

Out-of-home care (LAC) rates per 10,000 children by deprivation decile, England, 2015



Deprivation Deciles: 1 = least deprived

The Case Studies

Two overarching questions:

1. What is the interplay between decisions to intervene in children's lives and their social, economic and material circumstances?
2. What are the relative strengths of the variables that influence the unequal rates in decisions to intervene?

Two waves of fieldwork:

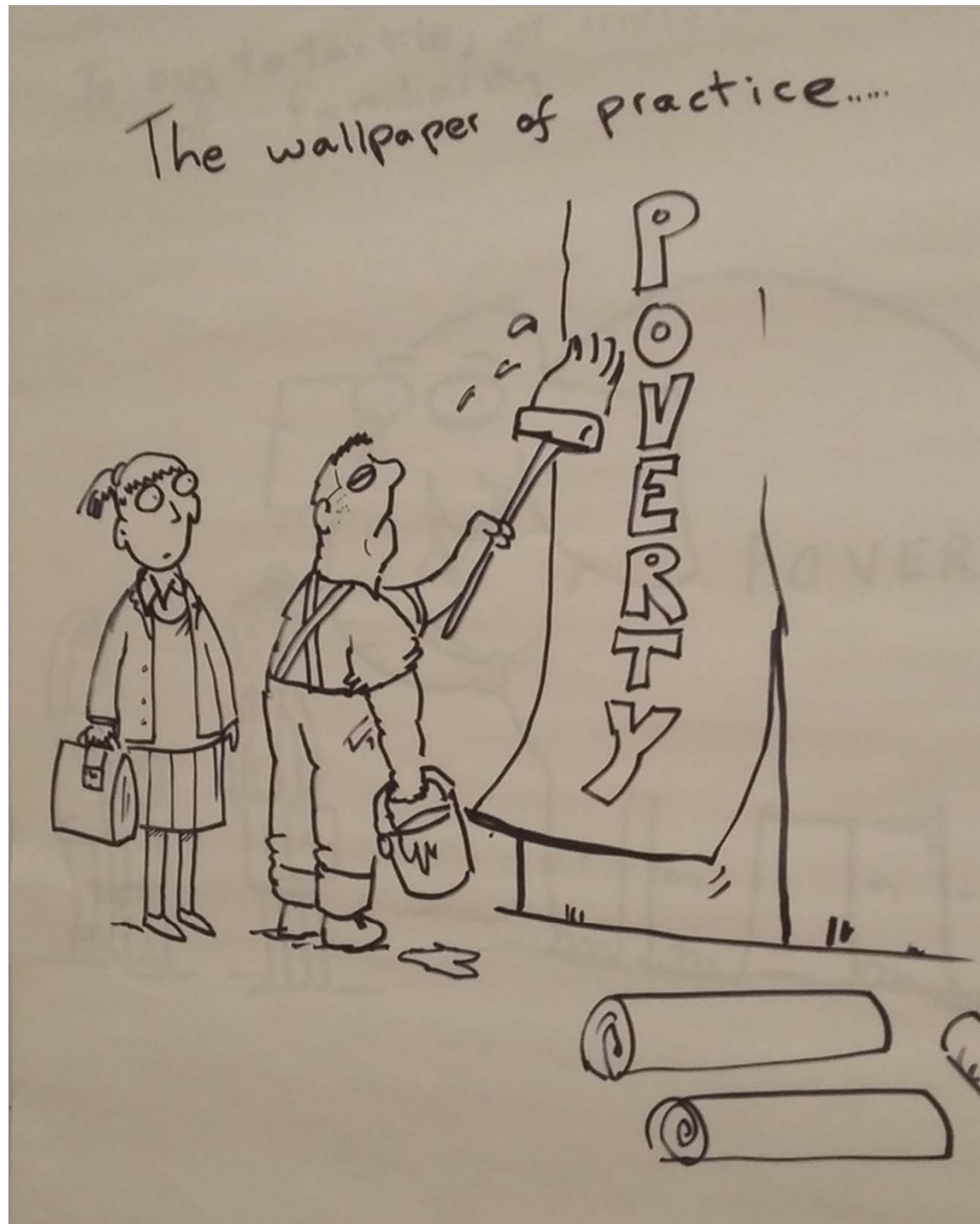
1. England (n=4) & Scotland (n=2)
2. Northern Ireland (n=2)

Mixed Methods

- Photographs and walking tours of case study sites
- Non-participant practice observation
- Semi-structured interviews (key informants)
- Focus groups (SWs/IRO)
- Case narratives
- Decision making flowcharts
- Analysis of documents
- Desk based research

Headline findings from England & Scotland

- **Poor localities are the usual sites of social work practice – this is an accepted norm**
- The overwhelming scale and complexity of unmet need and the hollowing out of family support resources form a uniform experience across all the sites
- Poverty is ingrained, endemic but usually not visible in practice responses and, though there were differences, this was surprisingly consistent across all the sites
- Social workers don't see anti poverty activity as 'core business' – they say they focus on risk / parenting and that others should be addressing issues of deprivation (food, warmth, shelter)
- At times practice narratives could reflect a focus on personal responsibility over structural determinants



C&FSW: “We are conscious of poverty, but it has been beaten out of us when we became professionals with a capital P”.

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C&FSW: “It’s just been chipped, chipped away. They don’t get rid of it all at once so you almost don’t notice it but you look back at previous reports and you think oh yeah, they [families] used to get all these supports”.

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C&FSW: “...we have to respond to need and to risk first and foremost and the other things are additional but they come afterwards”

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IILSW: We also do a lot of signposting families to foodbanks, or we can issue foodbank vouchers. But we tend, if we can, **we are more than fully committed doing what we would consider our core business, which is doing parenting skills, parenting capacity change type of things.** And this other stuff, whilst in a perfect world we should be doing it, and doing it with family, the reality is that the work load people would say "you need to be doing other things, getting other people to do that sort of thing for them, you can't, you haven't got the capacity and if you do it, **you run the risk of drowning**"

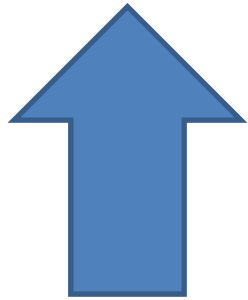
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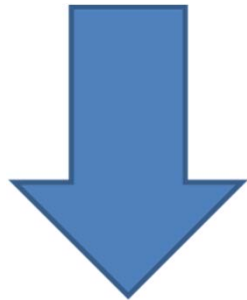
IRO: “You can give these families £1million and they will still have the same issues. They will still be in the CP system. It’s got nothing to do with deprivation ... Poverty is the outcome not the cause”



Northern Ireland



Higher Deprivation



Lower Intervention

Northern Ireland

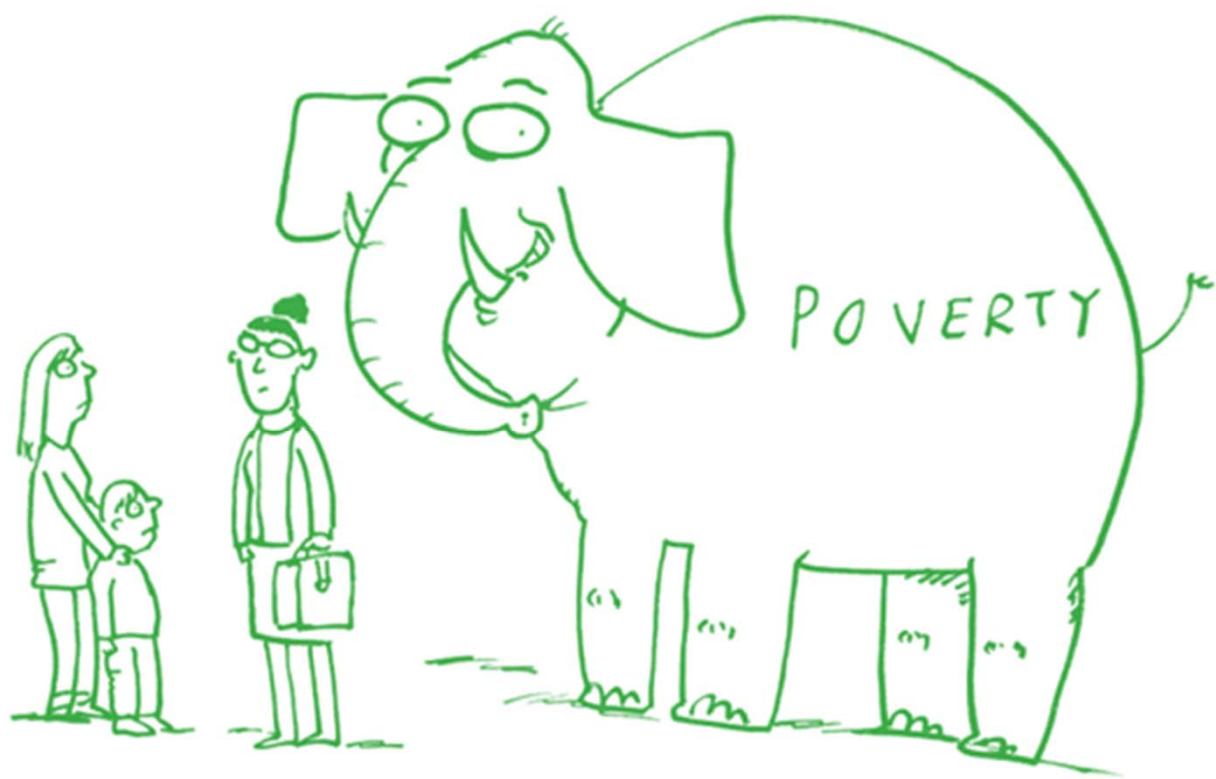
- The lower rates of high cost, late intervention in NI are worthy of much further research. The implications are significant - if England had rates similar to those in NI there would be around £1.5b pa less spent on the looked after system, with significantly fewer children in care
- NI has experienced delayed implementation of welfare reforms and have softened some of their impacts with mitigation packages (ending 2020).
- Social ties, networks and communities are key. Our analysis tended to support the hypothesis that a combination of stronger local support & practice narratives that acknowledged social and economic circumstances were important factors for understanding NIs position of higher deprivation and lower rates







POVERTY – THE ELEPHANT
IN THE ROOM



Summing up: lessons & questions

- Social workers often have deep knowledge about poverty & its consequences, but are rarely given adequate resources to engage with this
- There is a continued need to re-connect with the core business for *families* rather than *systems* – why does poverty so rarely feature in decision making?
- Changing practice isn't enough – structures and systems need to put deprivation and poverty at the heart of planning and service development
- Social ties, networks and communities are key & this includes local organisations offering tailored support to families – very small local services described as a “lifeline”
- The lower rates of high cost, late intervention in NI are worthy of much further research.



The aim is to re-frame child welfare

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