Tackling Difficult Questions: Rethinking Child Protection Strategy

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Our review of child protection and safeguarding trends shows a stark difference between the NSPCC’s estimate of the prevalence of child abuse in England and the amount of child abuse, (risk of, or actual significant harm) detected in referred cases. We published a Working Paper and an Evidence Briefing highlighting findings from our ESRC funded research, Rethinking Child Protection Strategy.

This project responds to the need to test the evidence base for current policy. We are looking at trend data and risk assessment together with public inquiries and serious case reviews. Our findings raise important questions about the way in which the legal framework has been interpreted in statutory guidance and policy, placing pressures on social workers and families.

‘A worrying trend’

Our data enables a counter-view to prevailing ideology, which we argue places significant pressure on social workers. Public concern about the amount of child abuse has increased as a consequence of media stories highlighting horrific abuse. This concern is further driven by suggestion that child abuse is far more prevalent than previously thought.

It is undoubtable that serious child abuse is a real and continuing problem in society and that a robust response to it is necessary. However, it is important that the concerns of social workers are listened to, together with the evidence that policies cutting resources whilst driving an increased number of referrals each year is not sustainable. Rather than leading to a proportionate increase in the level of child abuse found in referred children the numbers have dramatically fallen.

The ratio of detection has dramatically altered as policies driving increased referrals have increased, falling from 24% in 1991-1992 to 7.4% in 2013-2014. These ratios are not explained by early intervention as these numbers refer to families before intervention occurs.
‘Tensions not easily reconciled’

What is clear from the data is that simply encouraging referral is not resulting in an increasing amount of detected child abuse. Even allowing for the ‘rule of optimism’ it suggests that either the suggested prevalence is over-estimated, or that social workers are failing to identify child abuse when referred to them. This is why public perception of prevalence is an important factor in the blame culture where ‘failure to learn lessons’ is seen as the responsibility of social workers not a failure of policy.

The aim of the Children Act 1989 was to create a clear separation between families who do not need coercive intervention, and families who do. This separation was to enable social workers to engage in professional supportive work, moving only to non-consensual and coercive child abuse investigations where there was clear evidence to justify doing so.

This policy direction has weakened the separation between coercive and non-coercive involvement into private family life. The ‘boundary blurring’ has made questions of consent complex. I wrote an article on this in January, Considering Social Work Assessment of Families. There are safeguards and controls in law intending to create a balance between state power and private rights: has the balance been lost? If so, what should be done?

Future direction

The next stages of our research are to look at the contribution of risk assessment and serious case reviews. In the meantime, what is clear is there is urgent need for transformative change. The three important messages that need to be heard are: the evidence of the data that things are not working as policy intends, the culture of criticism of social workers when things go wrong despite the obvious finding from the data that social workers are operating in a virtually impossible environment, and evidence of the growing number of families who are finding social work assessment stressful as opposed to supportive.

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