Estimating child abuse numbers can overload social workers and put more pressure on families

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The Children’s Commissioner’s Report, *Protecting Children from Harm: a critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and Priorities for Action* presents, as the authors stress, tentative and indicative data about the prevalence and incidence of child sexual abuse in the family network. This follows the NSPCC’s 2011 Report authored by Radford et al estimating the prevalence of child maltreatment. The Children’s Commissioner’s Report uses Radford et al’s data although neither Report can provide a confident estimate of prevalence. Regardless, the reports are used to influence public perception, but are they helpful and how are the effects of policy change evaluated?

Undoubtedly public and professional perception of the prevalence of child abuse is important as it influences the culture in which professionals who work with children operate. Belief in a high level of undetected child abuse (sexual or otherwise), particularly in the family unit creates a receptive culture for policies encouraging detection, reporting and intervention. Recent policies are directed towards increased reporting, particularly via identifying ‘signs of abuse’, to be reported primarily by anyone who is under a s.11 Children Act 2004 duty. At first glance this is a step forward in reducing child abuse. However, deeper examination raises questions. Unintended consequences are revealed in the government data of reduced system efficiency, and numerous research studies indicate an increased risk of alienation of families feeling accused as opposed to supported, a risk of social work overload and the fear of missing some of the estimated high number of undetected cases.

The Report’s conclusions suggest there are a large number of undetected abusing families that need to be ‘identified’ and ‘prevented’. This conclusion legitimises further policy measures to police parents. However, from the evidence of
government annual statistics this is likely to result in a progressively more overloaded and less efficient system of referral and assessment if the negative impact of current policy is not taken into account. The hard data is collated and reported in *Rethinking Child Protection Strategy: Learning from Trends* funded by the ESRC and shows a counter-productive outcome from this prevailing policy drive.

There have been two key outcomes from recent policy, both noted in *Rethinking Child Protection Strategy: Learning from Trends*: Firstly there has been a progressive and statistically significant year on year drop in the proportion of child abuse (i.e. the number of substantiated cases as a ratio of referrals) that is addressed via social work involvement. Secondly, the widely noted unreliability of identification of abuse from ‘signs’ has consistently been seen as a secondary question to the importance of referring on the basis of ‘concerns’. Very few of these referrals amount to cases social workers consider are abuse (7.3% in 2013/2014, reduced from 24.1% in 1991/1992). As a result, children are under more intense scrutiny now than ever before in England, but despite the surveillance, scrutiny and lack of privacy prevalence estimates remain high. Matching the prevalence estimates against the policy outcomes does not show any significant increase in the amount of abuse detected.

The implications of policy decisions made following prevalence estimates is fraught with complexity. In the Children’s Commissioner’s Report the actual statistical analysis and its confidence limit is not included. The Report explains that the analysis uses MSE (Multiple Systems Estimation). This involves making assumptions about the probable level of overlap in recorded cases in different agencies (the police, social services and voluntary agencies) from a sample in time and geographic area. From this data a dark number can be estimated. How this has been done for this Report is not clear. Therefore not only does the level of undetected abuse remain a ‘dark number,’ the precise evaluation method used on the raw data is similarly ‘dark’.

Although this data collection and analysis is theoretically interesting, and is attractive to the media if reported in a sensationalist way, it does little to reliably inform policy, or to increase public understanding of this complex area. The media’s response to
the 450,000 estimate of apparent undetected child sexual abuse in the family network was unhelpful. Not only was the estimate quoted as actual, rather than estimate, prevalence data of child sexual abuse between close family members (not the less sensational ‘wider family network’) but unsurprisingly resulted in one-sided calls for ‘urgent action’ to ‘identify and prevent’ sexual abuse.

The real power of the estimate is not in finding out how much child abuse there is, but its use in persuading policy makers and the general public, that policies and funds to detect, investigate and prevent child abuse are justified by increasingly intrusive means. The question of balance within the system is not considered, nor is fairness towards social workers, who manage an increasing case load in an uneasy culture where blame can easily be assigned. Nor is the impact on families adequately considered if ‘parent’ becomes increasingly synonymous with ‘suspected abuser’. Balanced policy must take account of positive and negative impacts when responding to these estimates. At present it is not clear that it does.

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