

Towards a Research Agenda *for* Children's Social Care

Priorities for research using administrative data

ADR England Community Catalyst: Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes

Lucy Griffiths, Karen Broadhurst, Grace Bailey, Kat Tranter

The Catalyst project team

Lucy Griffiths
(co-lead)



Karen Broadhurst
(co-lead)



Dougal Hargreaves



Lisa Holmes



Jenny Woodman



Katie Harron



Kat Tranter



Marie Greaves



Grace Bailey



Imperial College
London



Project aims

Two-year programme of networking and information sharing to foster closer connections between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers - children's social care research

Four interlinked areas of work:

- ▶ Mapping existing research using administrative data, and in-depth stakeholder engagement work. Development of **research agenda and support** closer alignment of a research agenda with stakeholder priorities.
- ▶ Build capacity to use administrative and other large-scale datasets. A web-based "one-stop shop" for child-focused researchers, complemented by an effective communications strategy and online information events.
- ▶ Strengthen and expand a diverse administrative data research community. Networking events, focusing on ADR UK flagship datasets and use cases. Webinars and workshops.
- ▶ Research fellowship opportunity - use the Education and Child Health Insights from Linked Data (ECHILD) database.

**Full scoping review: Use of
administrative data to understand
children's involvement with children's
statutory social care services**

*Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes Community Catalyst
Full Report*

January 2025

 **Foundations**
What Works Centre for Children & Families



Economic
and Social
Research Council



ADR
ENGLAND

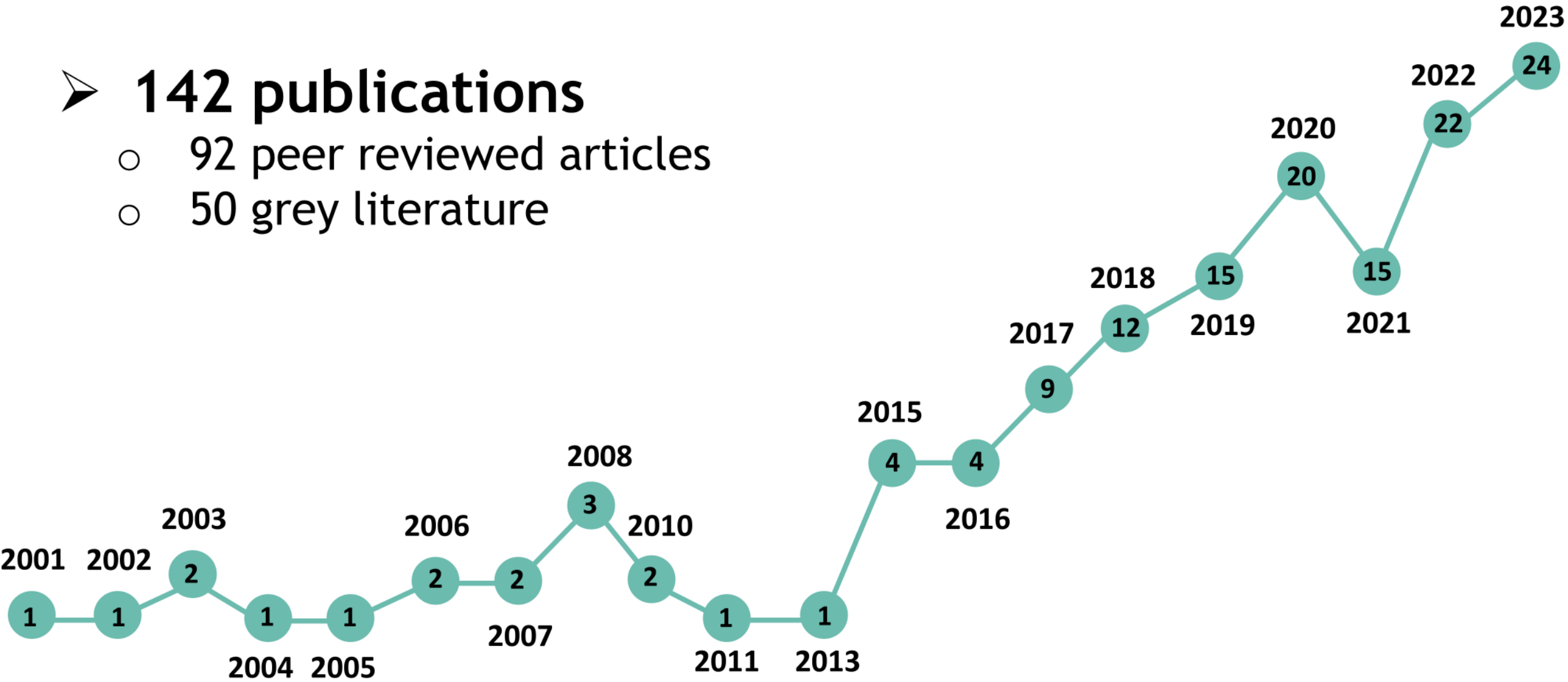
Scoping review

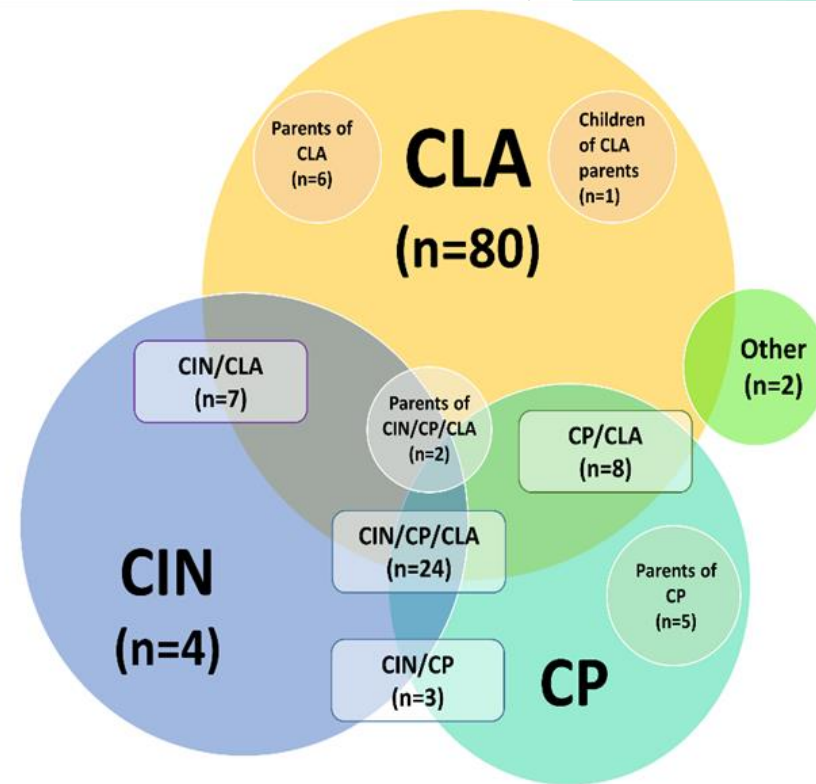
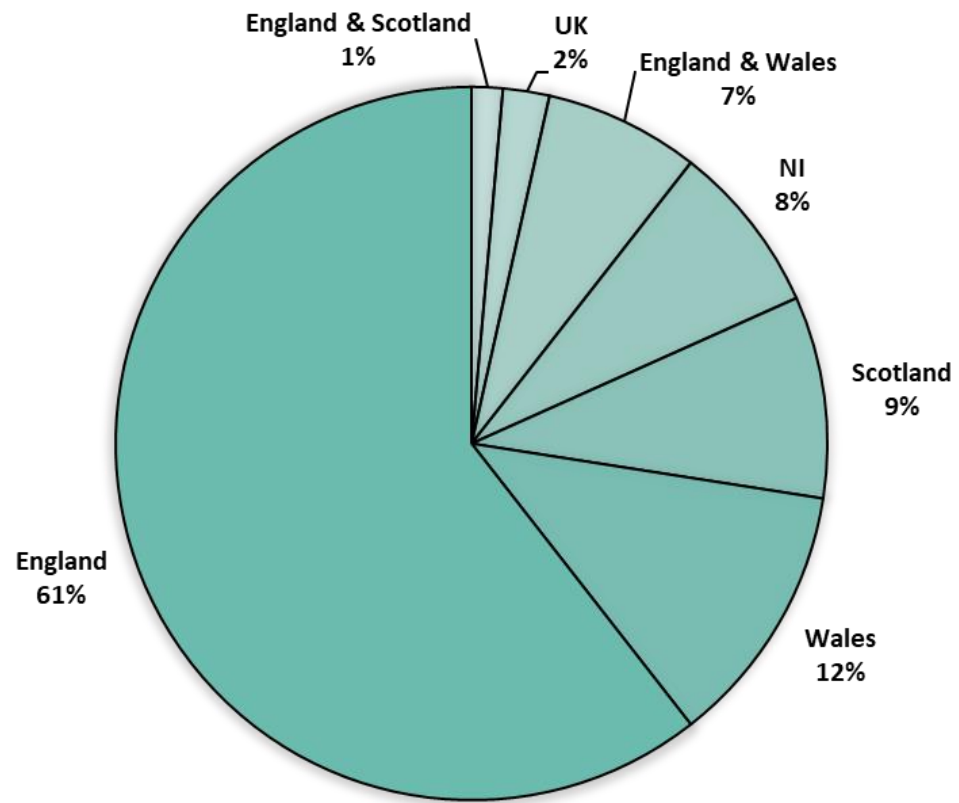
Distribution of publications



142 publications

- 92 peer reviewed articles
- 50 grey literature





Consistent findings

- Strong association between **deprivation and elevated rates of CSC involvement** - this evidence is strongest for CLA
- Children who enter care as an adolescent experience the most **problematic trajectories**
- **Placement instability** remains a consistent issue, with the number of younger children with two or more placements rapidly rising
- Children involved with CSC have **higher proportions of SEND and worse educational outcomes**
- These children are also at **greater risk of poor health outcomes** - with evidence more focus towards mental health than physical health
- A **range of maternal risk factors** are associated with children's involvement with CSC, whilst evidence on the **fathers is limited**

Tentative findings

- Findings regarding **minority groups** are limited making it difficult to draw firm conclusions
- Huge lack of nationwide evidence examining **rates and spend**
- Children with **SEND** are more likely to be looked after, but there is still a large gap in our understanding of how this impacts **educational outcomes**
- There is some evidence of **intergenerational vulnerability/risk**, but it is limited to descriptive studies
- Evidence of **dual involvement with criminal justice** largely focus on **youth offending**, but even this evidence is limited
- **Post-16 and care leaver** data is poor, although there is evidence of poor health persisting into adulthood

Evidence gaps

- **Holistic journeys** into and through statutory children's social care services
- Deprivation - at a **household level**, and how it effects children's **journeys through services**
- **Minority groups & protected characteristics:**
 - **Outcomes** by ethnic minority groups, UASC and faith/belief
 - Are they less likely to receive interventions?
- Spend and workforce turnover
- School disengagement - how is this linked with broader disengagement within the family?
- Research topics such as **domestic abuse** and **disability**
- Administrative data as an **evaluation tool**

**Speaking to stakeholders about research
priorities**

*Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes Community Catalyst
Stakeholder Consultation Report*

January 2025



Foundations
What Works Centre for Children & Families



Economic
and Social
Research Council



Stakeholder Consultation Key Messages



What we asked stakeholders?

1 What do you consider the most pressing needs of children and young people?

2 How are services responding to these needs?

3 Do you have the necessary data and information you need to understand these needs and responses?

4 Is your organisation able to make effective use of national children's data?

5 Are you aware of any innovation at a local or regional level regarding data sharing?

6 Are there any glaring gaps in current knowledge regarding children at risk of poor outcomes?

Roundtable consultation

Participants taking part in interviews, together with the wider research team, ADR England representatives and members of the steering group were invited to a roundtable in September 2024 to consider the main findings from the consultation

Main findings

Context of family life and service provision

- *Family Poverty*
- *Overstretched services and difficulties in providing timely help*
- *Workforce capacity, stability and spend*
- *Insufficiencies in early intervention need to be addressed at a national level.*

Key concerns

- *Family mental health*
- *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)*
- *School disengagement*
- *Children in care and care leavers*
- *Domestic abuse*
- *Extra-familial harm*

Stakeholder views on research, collaboration and data developments

The need for a holistic view of the child

Increase in meaningful outcome information

Active collaboration between academia, policy and practice

Making use of local and regional data

Involving children, young people and family perspectives

Stakeholder Perspectives

"...mental health concerns, coupled with the school attendance concerns that sort of have... have really come into sharp focus since the pandemic...makes for a pretty sort of, complex nexus for all children and young people."
(Research Intermediary Lead)

"We don't know whether business as usual works, is effective.... Like... is going into care good for you or bad for you? And we don't know...I mean, that's the big unanswered question, I suppose." (Central Government Research Lead)

"poverty... I mean, it feels like the single biggest issue affecting children's services at the moment. And in terms of where we lack understanding and insight....I think we lack an ability to genuinely delineate and disaggregate increased need...what that need really is.. and the causal factors behind it are."(Public Sector-led Improvement Lead)

"I think the biggest issue for us in the last couple of years since the pandemic, it's the growth in mental health referrals for both children and their parents... A lot of referrals from schools... we are seeing that it's, you know, it's both parents and children's mental health." (Children's Social Care, Service Lead)

A research agenda for research using
administrative data

*Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes Community Catalyst
Research Agenda*

January 2025

 Foundations
What Works Centre for Children & Families

 UKRI
Economic
and Social
Research Council

 ADR
ENGLAND

Research Agenda

Catalyst: Research Agenda

Over-arching:

- ▶ **Deliver cross-sector evidence** about children's pathways through services and outcomes
- ▶ Deliver evidence that **interrogates and informs earlier intervention and prevention**, as well as improving outcomes for children already in care
- ▶ **Collaborate to produce evidence** in both research design & analysis but also in the use of national and regional data assets
- ▶ Accelerate the use of flagship datasets & continue to **develop these datasets so that they can be used to tackle neglected topics**

10 Key Topics

- 1) Early help and children in need
 - 2) Household level hardship
 - 3) Family mental health
 - 4) Special educational needs and disabilities
 - 5) School disengagement
 - 6) Services and workforce
 - 7) Dual system involvement
 - 8) Domestic abuse/violence
 - 9) Minority groups
 - 10) Extra familial harms
- + Evaluation

Achieving a better balance... capturing prevention

- ▶ To-date, research using administrative data is weighted towards children in care - delivering multiple important insights - but insufficient attention to children's earlier involvement in preventative services - this is **at odds with an emphasis within policy on prevention**
- ▶ Focus on the kinds of help provided to families to prevent CSC involvement or to prevent escalation of concerns once children are involved with CSC
- ▶ Elements of the early intervention eco-system are not readily amenable - however, ADR UK flagship datasets can be used to advance knowledge

Household level hardship and CSC involvement

- ▶ Stakeholders paint a picture of increasing hardship at the level of the household - but it is difficult to capture the scale or nature of this, based on existing evidence.
- ▶ To complement research which uses area-level measures of deprivation to understand children's social care involvement, **new research with a household focus is needed.**
- ▶ In addition, it is important **to probe if this is a key driver of social care involvement.**
- ▶ Novel linkages of a range of data sources are required to rise to this challenge

Family mental health, SEND and School Disengagement

- ▶ Stakeholders have raised concerns about **the overall burden of mental health need within families**, in the context of increased family stress.
- ▶ Increasing rates of SEND were widely reported by stakeholders -new research is needed to ascertain the profile of **SEND for children involved with CSC**, and how these profiles compare to children not involved with CSC or **are changing over time**
- ▶ New research is needed regarding school disengagement, again with a specific focus on CSC children and changes over time.
- ▶ Stakeholders also welcome research which **captures interactions** between these kinds of needs/vulnerabilities within families

Services & workforce

- ▶ Further analysis of **organisational spend & workforce capacity** is critical
- ▶ There is some evidence about **staff turnover, staff vacancies and use of agency staff** but this is *very limited*.
- ▶ Use of the DfE's Children's Social Work, Workforce Census would benefit research, although it is not a statutory requirement for local authorities to record social worker changes
- ▶ Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of further research with this focus with **an emphasis on filling the gaps about the services that children and their families receive**

Dual System Involvement

- ▶ ADR UK flagship datasets enable completely novel analysis of dual system involvement, because datasets are linked across government departments.

MoJ-DFE Data Share

<https://www.adruk.org/data-access/flagship-datasets/ministry-of-justice-department-for-education-linked-dataset-england/>

Data First Programme

- ▶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ministry-of-justice-data-first#moj-cross-justice-system-datasets>

Domestic Violence/abuse

- ▶ Population-scale evidence about domestic abuse and children's social care involvement is long overdue....
- ▶ Major challenge in piecing together and linking the scattered information about domestic abuse, hence, foundational work to identify data sources and their linkages is required, bringing together relevant experts.
- ▶ CSC + criminal courts; police national computer, crime survey England and Wales.

Minority Groups and Inclusion

- ▶ High quality evidence is scarce - existing studies *lack nuance* by making comparison between **blunt population categories**
- ▶ More research is needed to examine **outcomes for minority groups, including ethnic minorities and UASC**, particularly **placement stability, reunification and health at a regional and national level** - use of granular ethnicity data is available in the ECHILD Database and should become standard practice
- ▶ Available evidence is that **UASC are a highly vulnerable population**. More detailed information on these children, such as that held by the Home Office (e.g., country of origin, healthcare referrals, victim of trafficking, formal education provision) would further our understanding

Extra Familial Harms

- ▶ What are pathways into and through CSC for children at risk of extra familial harms/experiencing extra familial harms? Do these children tend to be subject to CIN, CP or CLA involvement? For what duration?
- ▶ Is extra familial harm a primary reason for entry into CSC for children or are there patterns of co-occurring risk/vulnerability factors (e.g., mental health, school disengagement, historical abuse, involvement in the criminal justice system)?

Evaluation research

- ▶ Evaluation is are crucial for **informed policymaking and practice** development, providing essential evidence on whether policy changes or practice interventions are successful.
- ▶ Administrative data has the potential to be used for evaluation - however, evaluation research using admin is not particularly advanced.
- ▶ Need to draw together insight and understanding on the **potential and limitations** of administrative data for evaluation

Towards a research agenda: alignment

- ▶ Alignment with **government department research priorities**
- ▶ Alignment with **major movements in the field**, regarding the use of ADR UK flagship data, but also other regional and national dataset developments

Catalyst events

<https://www.adruk.org/learning-hub/user-groups-and-communities-1/adr-england-research-community-catalyst-children-at-risk-of-poor-outcomes/>

Events:

- ▶ Research design workshop – Feb
- ▶ Measuring deprivation at the area and a household level – April
- ▶ Administrative Data for Evaluation of Children's Social Care – May
- ▶ Early intervention research – July
- ▶ Research design workshop – Sep
- ▶ Linked local data on children and young people in London – Nov

- ▶ Children's Social Care Data User Group <https://cscdug.co.uk/>

