Briefing: Report by the Children’s Commissioner for England 'On measuring the number of vulnerable children in England'

Thursday 14th December, House of Lords.

- The Children’s Society welcomes the Children’s Commissioner for England’s report ‘On measuring the number of vulnerable children in England’.
- The report identifies that significant proportions of the child population are ‘vulnerable’.
- The Children’s Society’s own research echoes the research produced by The Children’s Commissioner.
- Official statistics highlight that the numbers of children known to social services, receiving support or in the care of the state has increased in recent years.
- Urgent action must be taken to ensure that local authorities have the resources they need to provide high-quality, early help to children and their families.

A Good Childhood in 2017?

Each year, The Children’s Society produce a state of the nation report looking at children’s subjective wellbeing.¹ This year, we looked for the first time at how disadvantages and vulnerabilities come together in children’s lives, and what impact this has on their wellbeing.

We found that 2.6 million children (10-17) are living with at least 3 disadvantages in their lives and, 1 million children aged 10-17 are living with 7 or more disadvantages in their lives. The more disadvantages a child has, the lower their wellbeing. Our analysis found that children with 7 or more disadvantages were 10 times more likely to have low levels of wellbeing than those who had experienced no disadvantages.

The range of disadvantages that children can experience in their lives are diverse. The Children’s Society have used a list of 27 different disadvantages to inform our Good Childhood report, ranging from emotional neglect, to living with a parent who has been victim of domestic violence, to frequently moving home, to living in a household struggling financially.

According to our research, the following disadvantages had the biggest impact on a child’s reported wellbeing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disadvantage</th>
<th>Number of children (10-17) who experience it</th>
<th>Reduction in mean wellbeing score (0-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional neglect</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>-1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of crime</td>
<td>950,000</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child not having or sharing a bed</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of homelessness</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This means that a child who experiences emotional neglect, on average grades their own life satisfaction 1.4 points (out of 10) lower than those who have not.

What do the latest official statistics tell us about children?

In the year ending 31st March 2017…

- 571,000 children had been referred to children’s social care services because an adult in their life was worried about them. There were almost 650,000 referrals, meaning that some children were referred more than once.  
  This is a 108% increase since 2010.

On 31st March 2017…

- 389,430 children were ‘in need’, meaning that the local authority must provide whatever support necessary to the child and their family for as long as they need it under section 17 of the Children Act 1989.  
  This is a 4% increase since 2010.
- 51,080 children were subject of a ‘child protection plan’ which means that the local authority must work with other agencies and the family to put together a strategy to address the risks to the child’s safety.  
  This is a 31% increase since 2010.
- 72,670 children had ‘looked after’ status, meaning that they were in care.  
  This is a 13% increase since 2010.

Why are children being referred to and assessed by children’s social care services?

- The main reasons for children being referred for an assessment by children’s social care services were abuse or neglect (52.3%), family dysfunction (16%) and child’s illness/disability (9.4%), closely followed by the family being in acute stress (9.2%).

---

The most common factors identified at the end of an assessment were: domestic violence (49.9%), mental health (39.7%) and emotional abuse (20.5%).

Children’s services funding and spending

Our analysis finds an ongoing trend where councils no longer have the resources to fund services that step in and help families early. Instead they are increasingly forced to focus on dealing with problems once they have escalated, when they are legally required to step in.

Central government funding for children’s services provided locally has reduced by £2.4bn since 2010. Whilst local authorities have prioritised spend on children’s services locally, they have had to reduce their spend on children’s services by £1.6bn since 2010.

Within that spend locally, there has been a shift from early to late interventions. Local authorities are spending 40% less on early intervention and 7% more on late intervention since 2010.

As the funding available for early intervention services has reduced significantly, greater demand is being placed on late intervention services as noted in the stark increases in the numbers of children known to social services. It is projected that between 2016 and 2020, central government funding for early intervention services will reduce by a further 29%.

The challenges being faced by local authorities is now being highlighted by representative bodies such as the Local Government Association who have identified that by 2020 there will be a £2bn gap in funding. This gap only reflects the level of funding required to maintain current spending on children and young people’s services based on 2016 figures. It does not reflect the additional cost of any increase in demand for these services by the end of the decade – or taking funding levels back to those seen in previous years.

There is a widening gap between how much local authorities are spending and how much they are receiving from central government in relation to children’s social care. A study which forms part of the Child Welfare Inequalities Project found that areas of high deprivation saw their children’s services expenditure per child reduce by an average of 21% from 2010-2015, compared with 7% in lower deprivation authorities.

What might this mean in practice?

We know from our own practice-base – which provided direct support to over 13,000 children last year – that when difficulties in children’s lives go unaddressed, they get more entrenched.

Example: Children whose parents abuse alcohol

700,000 children are living with parents who abuse alcohol and they may not be in contact with health or social care services until problems escalate and even then, parental alcohol misuse is not always recognised or recorded.

There may also be the feeling among agencies that if the adult is receiving an intervention then it will immediately impact positively on the child, without giving due consideration to a child’s additional emotional needs or caring responsibilities.

---

9 http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2017/02/28/children-poorest-areas-likely-enter-care-finds-study/
Preventative substance misuse services are among some of the vital early intervention services affected by local authority cuts. Without early help, the needs of vulnerable children and young people affected by parental alcohol misuse may escalate and result in increased overall costs to public services due to the higher level of intervention required. Early intervention should also be seen as early response to emerging problems, not just targeted help in the early years.

Findings from the Good Childhood Report 2017 highlight the multiple disadvantages faced by many young people who grow up households where a parent abuses alcohol. Additional support for young people affected by parental alcohol misuse, such as counselling services, youth services, young carers groups and supported accommodation, and removal of the Severe Disability Premium, are all impacted by local authority cuts.

**Questions to the Minister**

- Does the Minister recognise that the number of children known to social services is on the increase?
- Does the Minister recognise that there may be a causal relationship between reductions in early intervention funding, and the increases in the numbers of children receiving late interventions from local authorities?
- What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that local authorities have adequate funding to provide outstanding services for the children in their area?

For more information, please contact Matt Hussey at [matthew.hussey@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:matthew.hussey@childrenssociety.org.uk) or 020 7841 4485