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Explaining high rates of infants in care proceedings in deprived areas of Wales

Authors

Stefanie Doebler
Bachar Alrouh
Karen Broadhurst
Stuart Bedston
Linda Cusworth
Ashley Akbari
David Ford
Lucy J. Griffiths



Nuffield
Family Justice
Observatory

Report

This short report summarises results of recent analysis published by the Family Justice Data Partnership that aims to pinpoint the particular domains of deprivation associated with rates of infant entry to care in local authorities in Wales. The work complements research conducted as part of the *Born into Care* series, which is building a robust evidence base about the very youngest children in the family justice system.

Authors

Stefanie Doebler, Lancaster University

Bachar Alrouh, Lancaster University

Karen Broadhurst, Lancaster University, Co-director of the Family Justice Data Partnership

Stuart Bedston, Swansea University

Linda Cusworth, Lancaster University

Ashley Akbari, Swansea University

David Ford, Swansea University, Co-director of the Family Justice Data Partnership

Lucy J. Griffiths, Swansea University

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100 St John St, London EC1M 4EH T: 020 7631 0566

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**Family Justice
Data Partnership**



**Population Data Science
at Swansea University**



**Medical School
Ysgol Feddygaeth**



**Adolescent Mental Health
DATA PLATFORM**



Introduction

A series of studies have now confirmed an association between deprivation and higher rates of children and infants in care.¹ This association is not particular to the UK, but is evidenced in a number of international jurisdictions. A growing body of literature challenges a narrow focus on parental risk factors alone (for example, domestic abuse or substance misuse), and calls for a broadening of the policy and practice lens on the needs of families involved with children's services and the family courts (Skinner et al., 2021). As Skinner writes, socioeconomic circumstances are not minor contextual details; rather they profoundly shape parenting capacity. Therefore, in order to reduce the number of infants and children entering out of home care, it is important to better understand and account for the impact of deprivation.

In this short summary of a full report published by the University of Lancaster's Centre for Child and Family Justice Research, we summarise the results of recent analysis that aimed to pinpoint the particular domains of deprivation associated with rates of infant entry to care in local authorities in Wales (Doebler et al. 2021). Comparisons are also drawn with older children.

The report builds on the *Born into Care* series, which is building a robust evidence base about the very youngest children in the family justice system (Broadhurst et al. 2018; Alrouh et al. 2019; Griffiths et al. 2020).

In contrast to the majority of literature published to date, which uses composite measures of deprivation, our study aimed to establish whether any of the eight domains of deprivation included in the Welsh Indices of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD)—income, employment, health, education, access to services, housing, community safety and physical environment—were more strongly related to infants entering care and to compare with patterns for older children. We found that ecological factors such as income and employment deprivation in small areas clearly play an important part in explaining rates of infant entry to care.

The use of composite measures of deprivation is well established. However, such measures hide the differential effects of particular deprivation domains. When funding is scarce, there is considerable merit in helping policy-makers to target the *particular aspects of hardship* that may have the greatest impact. This is especially true in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already been found to have exacerbated inequalities and delivered markedly higher unemployment rates, particularly in the UK and the US, Canada and Australia (Blundell et al. 2020; Johnston et al. 2020).

The work represents the first ever national study of infants in care proceedings in Wales to use full service administrative data from the family courts

¹ This study uses the term 'infants' to refer to children under one year of age.

in Wales. Novel linkage of de-identified anonymised records for a sample of 7,381 children who were subject to s.31 care proceedings between 2014 and 2019 has been possible through the work of the Family Justice Data Partnership—a collaboration between Lancaster University and Swansea University—supported by the secure environment of the SAIL Databank at Swansea University.

Research from the *Born into Care* series has highlighted rising rates of infant entry to care in Wales, including newborn babies—a rate that doubled between 2015/16 and 2018/19 (Alrouh et al. 2019). This makes the search for robust insights that can help steer the policy agenda particularly pressing.

The focus on Wales seeks to help redress the imbalance in the UK literature, as the majority of published research on children in care has tended to focus on England, despite the fact that England and Wales share the same legal family justice frameworks.

Data and methodology

The original study used administrative data from the Welsh Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass Cymru) on all children (n=7,381) who were subject to care proceedings in Wales under s.31 of the Children Act 1989, between calendar years 2014 to 2018. This data was linked to area-level deprivation data on the 22 Welsh local authorities, provided by the Welsh Statistics agency, and to social care data covering the local authorities' net expenditure for family support services (Stats Wales 2014; 2019). The data was accessed via the SAIL Databank, a secure privacy-protecting data sharing platform (Ford et al. 2009; Jones et al. 2019; Lyons et al. 2009).

Our use of data was reviewed and approved by the SAIL Information Governance Review Panel.

We used Poisson regression analysis to tease out statistical relationships between the different deprivation domains and the incidence rates for infants and children entering care proceedings between 2014 and 2019, controlling for the social care expenditure of local authorities. A detailed description of the approach to analysis is available in the full report (Doebler et al. 2021).

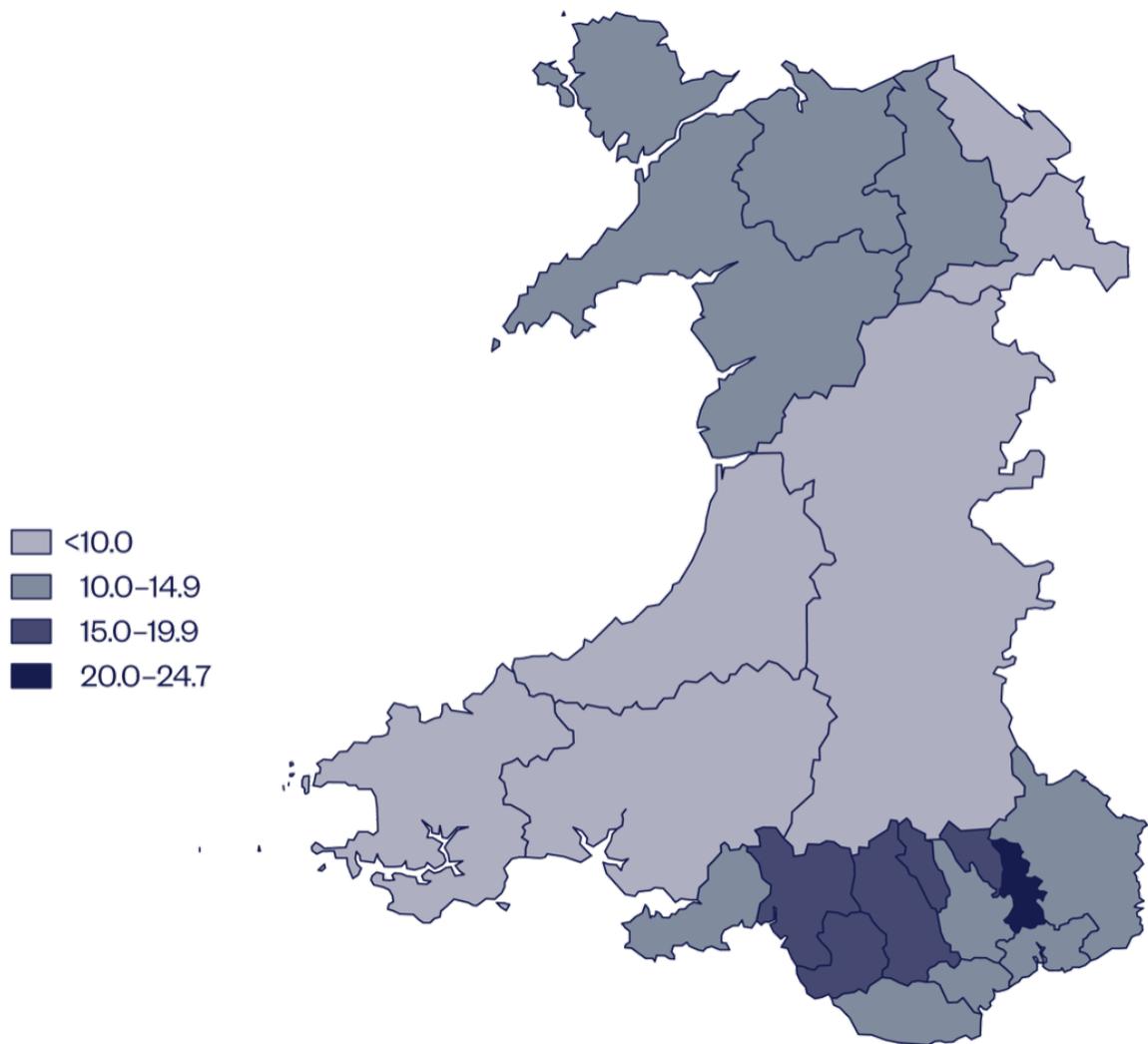
Key findings

Our analysis showed high incidence rates in many local authorities in Wales, especially among infants (see Figure 1).

In South Wales, incidence rates are particularly high in: Torfaen, Merthyr Tydfil, areas around Neath Port Talbot, Bridgend, Rhonda Cynon Taf, Swansea, the Vale of Glamorgan, Cardiff, and Newport.

In North Wales we found above average rates in the Isle of Anglesey, Gwynedd Conwy and Denbighshire.

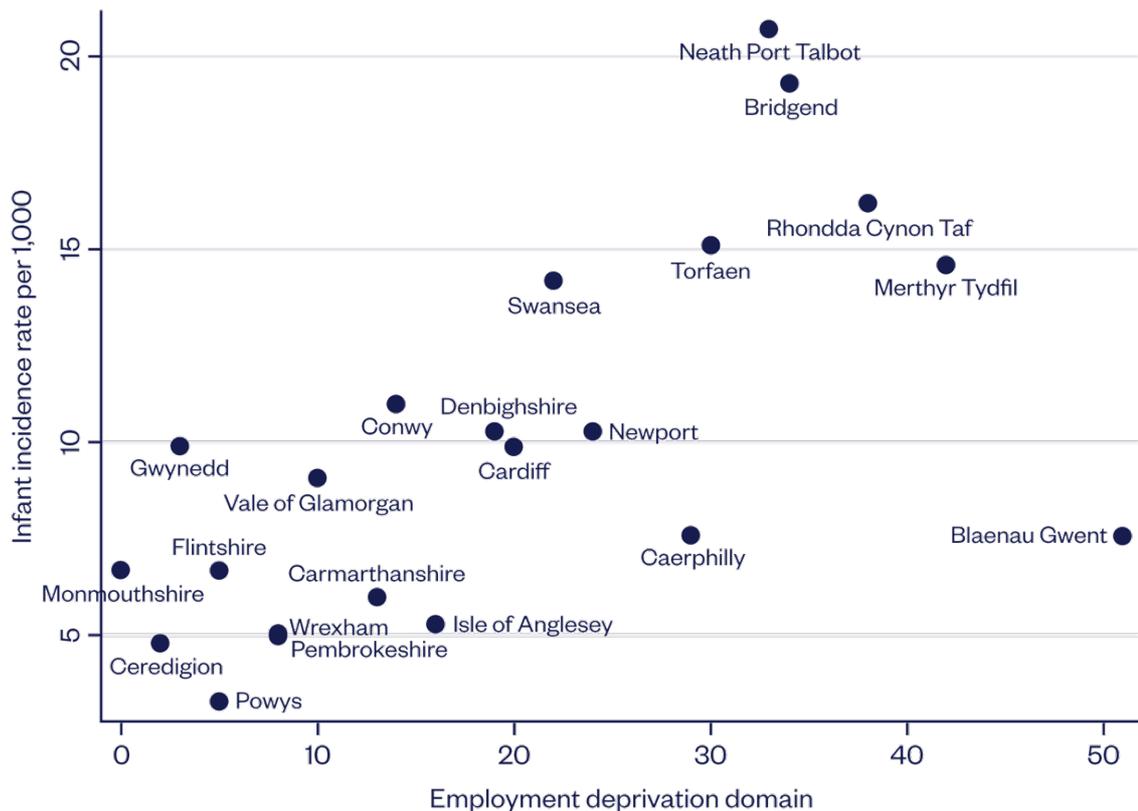
Figure 1: Incidence rates of infants in s.31 care proceedings per 1,000



Our analyses uncovered that of the eight deprivation domains operationalised in the WIMD, only four—employment, income, education and health deprivation—were statistically significantly in terms of an increased risk of infants and children within

local authorities becoming subject to care proceedings. Interestingly, these are the four domains that have the strongest reliance on aggregated individual and household-level measures (household income, number of people on employment benefits, number of school dropouts, and proportion of people with lower levels of qualification). The physical environmental factors such as access to services (area remoteness in kilometres), housing and physical environment (climate and extent of pollution) were all statistically non-significant.

Figure 2: Incidence rates of infants in s.31 care proceedings per 1,000



As might be expected, relationships between deprivation and infant appearances in care proceedings are not entirely straightforward. A small number of areas evidenced only slightly above average deprivation scores but had particularly high rates of children in care proceedings. Taking outliers into account, the employment and income deprivation domains showed the most consistent pattern.

Our statistical modelling and comparisons between infants and children, also showed that the effects of all four deprivation domains hold the most strongly for infants.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our models showed that the broader ecology of employment, income, education and health-related policies matters greatly for the safety and welfare of infants. The government expenditure for family support services, while weakly correlated with the incidence rates of infants and children subject to care proceedings, ceased to be significant when controlling for deprivation. This does not mean the investment and expenditure do not matter; rather the analysis points to the strong effects of these particular domains of deprivation. Moreover, infants are most vulnerable to the impact of these domains in terms of appearing in care proceedings.

Our findings regarding the importance of employment, income and educational deprivation are important especially for the post-industrial communities in Wales in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the most deprived areas in our study (including Torfaen, Merthyr Tydfil and Neath Port Talbot) are ex-mining communities and towns, where decades of de-industrialisation have resulted in jobs losses, years of persistent employment deprivation, and income deprivation. Recent media coverage has highlighted the scarring effect of de-industrialisation, now coupled with the increased risk of COVID-19 morbidity and mortality in these communities (Pasha-Robinson 2018; Smith and Aguilar Garcia 2020).

Our findings indicate that beyond targeted family support, policymakers should consider broader ecological measures that strengthen local labour markets and ameliorate income deprivation as well as measures to boost health and educational outcomes for vulnerable children and families. Although very recent research on fathers has highlighted unemployment and precarious employment as key vulnerabilities for fathers in care proceedings (Philip et al. 2021), all too often such issues are overlooked in both research and family support provision, which focuses on the now outdated concept of the 'toxic trio'.

The success of the government's 'levelling up' agenda needs to take into account, the extent to which social policies impact positively on the most vulnerable children and families in Welsh areas already blighted by deep-rooted poverty.

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Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, Nuffield FJO provides accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare, and justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

Family Justice Data Partnership

The Family Justice Data Partnership is a collaboration between Lancaster University and Swansea University, with Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru as integral stakeholders. It is funded by Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

SAIL Databank

Cafcass Cymru data used in this study is available from the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) Databank at Swansea University, Swansea, UK, which is part of the national e-health records research infrastructure for Wales. All proposals to use this data are subject to review and approval by the SAIL Information Governance Review Panel (IGRP). When access has been granted, it is gained through a privacy-protecting safe-haven and remote access system, referred to as the SAIL Gateway. Anyone wishing to access data should follow the application process guidelines available at: www.saildatabank.com/application-process