

Who is 'taken into care?': Knowledge production through dialogue with social workers

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While social workers are increasingly asked to develop evidence-based/informed practice, what do they know about the number and characteristics of children entering care and the outcomes for these children and how this information can be used to generate new practice knowledge? This paper analyses data held on children who enter the State child care system (residential and foster care) via four social work teams over a ten-year period (2002-2012). An administrative database of information routinely collected has been adapted to provide information on the 3063 children who have entered the child care system on 15450 occasions over this period. Analysis of this database identifies specific patterns in relation to referrals and admissions into care as percentage of the total population of children in Cork and Kerry. These incidence rates have then been analysed in relation to the four social work teams on the basis of the type of admissions, number of admissions per child and the characteristics of children (e.g. age and gender). The research highlights difference similarities between the four social work teams in relation to the age of children coming into care; the length of time in care; the number of episodes of care; and the growing disparity between the referral rate to social workers and the number of child coming in to care. A series of meetings were held with the social work teams to discuss the findings of the research and to generate more nuanced understandings of children's pathways into and out of care. The meetings were particularly useful in generating new research questions and developing methodologies for the collection and analysis of further data on pathways of children into/out of care. The research raises questions about what 'counts' as practice knowledge and what roles can social work have in data collection and the analysis of data?