



**NATIONAL
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Evidence paper: Impact of investing in prevention on demand for statutory children's social care



As part of the development of our report 'Supporting and strengthening families through early help – A rapid review of evidence', published in June 2021, the National Children's Bureau spoke to academic researchers about emerging evidence on the association between expenditure on children's services, poverty and children's social care demand. This evidence paper has been prepared independently by some of these researchers to provide an up-to-date summary of this evidence now that it has been published in, or accepted for publication in, peer-reviewed journals.

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Emerging evidence

This evidence paper briefly outlines newly published evidence which underpins arguments in the NCB report, 'Supporting and strengthening families through early help – A rapid review of evidence'.

<https://www.ncb.org.uk/supporting-and-strengthening-families-through-early-help-rapid-review-evidence>

This evidence shows that increased spending on children's social care preventative services (including family support and early help) has a positive impact on:

- Ofsted judgements
- Numbers of Children in Need
- Rates of 16–17 year olds starting periods in care.

However, the distribution of local authority spending on prevention has become increasingly less well matched to need.

The evidence paper also reports two recent papers that reinforce the contributory causal relationship between family poverty and levels of child abuse and neglect and demand for children's social care services, including rates of entry to care.

The evidence paper concludes with a brief summary of further contextual research on the association between household income and intervention, and on systems-thinking in children's social care.

Recent articles on prevention

1. Ofsted judgements:

Webb, C., Bennett, D., Bywaters, P. (2022). Austerity, Poverty, and Children's Services Quality in England: Consequences for Child Welfare and Public Services. *Social Policy & Society*.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S147474642200001X>

After controlling for deprivation, each £100 per child increase in preventative services expenditure was associated with a 1.7 times increase in the odds of a local authority being judged to be 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted.

- This increase was found to be broadly applicable across all domains of Ofsted inspection and was significant even after controlling for deprivation.
- Safeguarding (child protection social work) expenditure was not found to be associated with Ofsted judgements.
- Previous analyses by the National Audit Office and by Wilkins & Antonopoulou did not find similar results. We argue that this is because their respective studies conflated different types of spend and did not maximise their sample of inspections using multilevel modelling techniques.

2. Numbers of Children in Need:

Webb, C. (2021). In Defence of Ordinary Help: Estimating the effect of Early Help/ Family Support Spending on Children in Need Rates in England using ALT-SR. *Journal of Social Policy*.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279421000696>

Over the past decade, increases of around £10 per child in spending on preventative services within local authorities in a given year has been associated with, at the peak of the effect, reductions of just over 1.1 per 10,000 in Children in Need rates the following year. The lagged effect of preventative services expenditure on rates of Children in Need suggests that there were an additional 13,000 to 16,500 children and young people in England in need for each year between 2011 and 2015 than there would have been if expenditure had been sustained at 2010/11 levels.

- The effectiveness of preventative spending for reducing CIN rates, measured in this way, has been declining for the past decade, which may be a result of insufficient funding to deal with primary needs and/or a greater focus on retaining therapeutic interventions over family support/community development throughout the decade.
- Previous studies have found no association between spending and Children in Need rates. This is argued to derive from the difficulty comparing local authorities due to differences in thresholds over time. The study introduces the ALT-SR model from clinical psychology to adjust for this.

3. Rates of 16–17 year olds starting periods in care:

Bennett, D. L., Webb, C. J. R., Mason, K. E., Schlüter, D. K., Fahy, K., Alexiou, A., Wickham, S., Barr, B., & Taylor-Robinson, D. (2021). Funding for preventative Children's Services and rates of children becoming looked after: A natural experiment using longitudinal area-level data in England. *Children and Youth Services Review*.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2021.106289>

Between 2012 and 2019, each additional £100 per child spent on preventative services for adolescents in a given year was associated with an average decrease of 1.9 per 10,000 sixteen and seventeen year olds entering care the following year.

- This effect can account for 1 in 25 care entries among the sixteen and seventeen year old age group between 2012 and 2019; this is the largest growing group of children entering care, with rates increasing from 26 per 10,000 in 2011 to 53 per 10,000 in 2019.
- The same effect was not detected for one-to-four year olds.
- This association was robust, even when more general categorisations of expenditure were used.

4. The distribution of preventative spending:

Webb, C. (2022). More Money, More Problems? Addressing the Funding Conditions Required for Rights-Based Child Welfare Services in England. *Societies* 12, 9: 1–19. <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/12/1/9/htm>

Spending on preventative services has become less well matched to areas of greatest underlying need for children's social care over the past decade.

Research papers on poverty and children's social care demand

5. Child poverty and children starting a period in care:

Bennett, D.L., Schlüter, D.K., Melis, G., Bywaters, P., Barr, B., Wickham, S., Taylor-Robinson, D. (2022). Child poverty and children entering care: a longitudinal ecological study at local area-level in England, 2015–2020. *The Lancet Public Health* (in Press).

Between 2015 and 2020, a 1 percentage point increase in child poverty was associated with 5 additional children under the age of 16 entering care per 100,000, after controlling for employment trends.

- This effects can account for 8.1% of care entries over the study period, equivalent to over 10,000 additional children.
- The short-run costs to local government alone are an estimated £1.4 billion.

6. Child poverty and child abuse and neglect:

Bywaters, P. and Skinner, G. (2022) The Relationship between Poverty and Child abuse and Neglect: New Evidence. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/relationship-between-poverty-and-child-abuse-and-neglect>

New evidence published between 2016 and 2021 strongly reinforces the case that poverty is a contributory causal factor in child abuse and neglect. Eighteen new quasi-experimental studies demonstrated that improved family socio-economic circumstances alone reduced rates of abuse and neglect while economic shocks resulted in increased maltreatment.

- To reduce child abuse and neglect, a sustainable level of household income and good-quality housing are needed in addition to the provision of ancillary services for more acute needs, especially in the context of rising child poverty.

Contextual research

Webb, C., Bywaters, P. Scourfield, J., McCartan, C., Bunting, L., Davidson, G. and Morris, K. (2020) Untangling Child Welfare Inequalities and the 'Inverse Intervention Law' in England, Children and Youth Services Review Vol. 117, October.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2020.104849>

Children in the most deprived 10 per cent of neighbourhoods are over 10 times more likely to be looked-after, or on a child protection plan, than children in the least deprived 10 per cent of neighbourhoods.

- These effects are not equal across all local authorities, with the association between poverty and intervention being strongest in the most income-unequal and least deprived authorities.

Hood, R., Goldacre, A., Gorin, S. and Bywaters, P. (2020) 'Screen, Ration and Churn: Demand Management and the Crisis in Children's Social Care', The British Journal of Social Work, 50(3), pp. 868–889.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz035>

Children's services use multiple thresholds to manage demand and ration services, helping them adapt to external pressures such as levels of funding, child abuse scandals, and Ofsted judgements.

Changes to the way children's services are resourced have a knock-on effect on the way thresholds operate. Screening and rationing are linked to failure demand and affect intervention rates in ways that may not reflect the changing needs of families or the incidence of abuse and neglect. Such system effects are one reason why measuring the effectiveness of expenditure is so challenging.

- Excessive gatekeeping can increase costs through the gradual accumulation of demand in more expensive tiers of provision.
- A systems model of children's social care indicates that reversing the accumulation of failure demand requires a sustained commitment to re-aligning children's services to provide diverse forms of early help. In the short term, rates of low-tier interventions may increase as thresholds decrease and more families receive support. However, in the long term, this is likely to be more than offset by a fall in rates of more expensive late intervention, helping to create a more sustainable system.

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