



RDAC

Rethinking domestic abuse in child protection: responding differently

Professors Kate Morris and Brid Featherstone



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Outline of presentation



- The Change Project-rationale and aims
 - Key elements of the programme
 - RDAC research programme
 - Findings and implications
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<https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/media/aqlg5tnw/domestic-abuse-and-child-protection-change-project-overview-and-feedback.pdf>

<https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/change-projects/change-project-dva/>

RDAC Aims

To address the significant gaps in current knowledge about the nature and characteristics of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in child protection (CP)

To examine the relationship between DVA, child protection responses and intersecting inequalities, identifying how these shape experiences and outcomes

Building upon the outputs from these two aims, co-produce evidence informed frameworks with practitioners and families to support new approaches in policy and practice

Methods

- ▶ Three case-study sites: two sites in England and one in Scotland
- ▶ Quantitative analysis of administrative data (Children in Need census in England, Child Protection Conferences in Scotland)
- ▶ Interviews, focus groups and case file audits in sites
- ▶ Collaborative reflective work with an embedded Community of Practice
- ▶ A series of Family Forums
- ▶ Literature reviews

Our approach

- ▶ We sought to hear the views of all those involved, recognising that there are multiple positions and perspectives, but we acknowledge that there are absent voices, and this continues to be a very contested and sensitive area
- ▶ Over time, we have become more aware of the importance of expanding our conversations and of recognising the provisional nature of our knowledge claims

Key themes

Understanding what is going on - a fragile knowledge base?

Problematic practice orthodoxies

Quantitative data

- ▶ A secondary quantitative analysis of administrative data was undertaken in each of the three case study sites (C1, C2 and C3).
- ▶ Child-level data on children's social care (CSC) provision over a three-year period were combined with demographic data on small neighbourhoods.
- ▶ The CSC data consisted of extracts from data collections prepared by local authorities, which are reported on an annual basis to the national governments in England and Scotland- in England, the Children in Need census

Official data - CIN categories relating to Domestic Violence

- ▶ Concerns about the child being the subject of domestic violence.
- ▶ Concerns about the child's parent(s)/carer(s) being the subject of domestic violence.
- ▶ Concerns about another person living in the household being the subject of domestic violence.
- ▶ Ref: Department for Education (2023) Children in need census 2024 to 2025. Guide for local authorities. [Children in need census 2024 to 2025: guide - GOV.UK](#)

Findings

- ▶ Approximately one third of assessed cases recorded DVA as a concern – this is what might be considered an ‘ambiguous’ finding
- ▶ Within this group DVA as a ‘single’ issue was the largest category
- ▶ Existing data allows for some insights into patterns of needs (‘clusters’) but limited
- ▶ Overall younger children more likely to be progressed to CPP
- ▶ There is a social gradient (as with all children’s services interventions) with more deprived children more likely to be a focus of concern

Some limitations of the data being gathered

- ▶ There is no data collected on socio-economic factors of families
- ▶ No data recorded on who caused the harm and why
- ▶ The categories are problematic
- ▶ The range and interplay of intersecting needs is not represented

Qualitative data and sense checking

- ▶ Case-file audits found complex picture in that where DVA was recorded as a single factor, this was often not the case
- ▶ The recording of factors not necessarily seen as high priority
- ▶ The breadth of scholarship in this area was not referred to or always known by interviewees
- ▶ There was only one specialist project using research -based typologies that differentiate between different types of DVA

A fragile knowledge base

- ▶ Developing more robust knowledge about the nature and characteristics of DVA in child protection would be helped by:
- ▶ Exploring with managers and practitioners why collecting good data matters, and developing data literacy in a complex emotive area
- ▶ Re-thinking the categories used in administrative data and the practice mechanisms for identifying needs and responses in this field
- ▶ Increasing the ability to hear and talk about multiple dimensions of DVA, accompanied by a confidence in understanding causes and consequences and engaging with the research on these
- ▶ Supporting research minded policy and practice cultures that engage with the international evidence on the role of cross-cutting issues
- ▶ Enabling data systems to capture intersecting inequalities and their consequences

Practice : An appetite for change

- ▶ There is evidence of practice innovation
 - ▶ Specialist services using sophisticated assessment tools based upon evidence, developing community engagement strategies and working responsively with women, men and children
 - ▶ Family involvement strategies
 - ▶ Tools to strengthen case- work eg, Safe and Together

Key themes : practice

- ▶ Plans and narratives did not display awareness of, and responses to, the impact of socio-economic conditions on the difficulties being experienced by families
- ▶ This is completely understandable in the context of the widespread framing of DVA as a problem that is not impacted by intersecting inequalities

Practice

- ▶ Despite widespread recognition of the need for change, the case- files, in particular, suggest mothers continue to be held responsible for children's protection and often receive formulaic responses / services and men are often 'disappeared'
- ▶ Individual case-work approaches dominate

The language of choice

- ▶ The notion of 'choice' recurs in the data, with different implications for men and women
- ▶ For those especially those who used S&T, contextualising women's 'choices' was apparent
- ▶ However, men were presented as entirely rational actors

Thinking about men

Complexity within the category 'men' not always acknowledged

An apparent anxiety about engaging with men's life stories - fear of falling into traps around excusing abusive behaviour

Research on areas such as substance misuse not well known

The dominance of a 'public story' often meant men who are harmed were invisible (this also meant multiple other stories unable to be voiced)

Intersectionality ...

- ▶ The challenges for minoritised families in engaging with state services were not routinely acknowledged – this raises troubling questions about the focus on strengthening multi-agency working
- ▶ The widespread use of terms such as ‘denial’ and ‘collusion’ inhibited reflection on the impact of service interactions with families

Responses over the life course

- ▶ We did not have ethical permission to engage children and young people (for example, in family forums)
- ▶ From case-files we discerned some themes for further exploration
- ▶ Despite their apparent centrality to the entire child protection project, children are often invisible in narratives and plans
- ▶ Adolescents present categorisation challenges

Inter-generational challenges

- ▶ Service responses to families' experiences of DVA over time raised troubling issues
- ▶ The use of kinship care in the context of long-standing patterns of DVA needs to be discussed

Overall, in terms of practice issues

- ▶ There has been a consistent trend over time to frame DVA as a child protection issue and this has been accepted within the sector
- ▶ Moreover, it has become framed as a problem of **performance** by agencies – focus on how, rather than why
- ▶ So, strengthening casework and multi-agency working seen as key

What's the problem with these responses?

- ▶ Individual casework is resource intensive and operates only at the micro level
- we found lots of examples where differentiated responses needed at a range of levels
- ▶ Multi-agency working is too often about collecting information from professionals who don't know the families- time consuming and frustrating
- ▶ We found evidence where police and children's services working together reinforced risks and fostered an 'us' and 'them' mentality
- ▶ Deep engagement with families and communities becomes a secondary concern but that's where knowledge about, and resources for, safety as well as risks are often held

Developing a different frame?

- ▶ A problem for child protection but CANNOT only a problem for child protection
- ▶ Opening up wider conversations about social policies and the interconnections between a range of social problems
- ▶ A range of strategies needed in terms of services- links with poverty proofing are key



For more information and RDAC open-access resources visit:
<https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/content-pages/open-access-resources/rdac/>

Contact:

kate.morris@sheffield.ac.uk
b.m.featherstone@hud.ac.uk



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