Making the case for the difference that social work can make to people’s lives, Colin Pritchard and Richard Williams outline their research into the outcomes for looked after children compared with those excluded from school. The research also reveals the work needed to support long-term life chances for children permanently excluded from school.

Measuring the difference

At BASW England’s AGM in April, we argued that social work has to confront a key question – “do we make a measurable difference” to the lives of those we would serve, or, in the words of the American writer James Baldwin, “are you (and I) part of the solution or part of the problem?”

We responded to this question with evidence from three studies. The first, a 2010 study published in the British Journal Social Work – Comparing Possible Child-Abuse-Related-Deaths in England & Wales with the Major Developed Countries 1974-2006 (Pritchard C & Williams R) – looked at ‘macro’ outcomes which concerned the reduction of child abuse-related deaths at national levels.

The second study, in 2006, Breaking the Cycle of Educational Alienation (Williams & Pritchard, Open University Press), looked at ‘micro’ outcomes from a school-based social work project that halved truancy, reduced delinquency and demonstrated ‘savings’ from crime reduction. The third looked at outcomes for formerly looked-after-children (LAC) as young men (16-24) published in the Journal of Social Work (Pritchard & Williams, 2008) – Does Social Work Make a Difference? A controlled study of former looked after children compared with those excluded from school. The research also reveals the work needed to support long-term life chances for children permanently excluded from school.

‘Failure’ on this effective project was measured as permanent school-exclusion from school, a group that would become our comparator against looked-after-children.

Not too surprisingly, on analysing the five-year cohort of PEFS, we found 20% of them had also been LAC adolescents. We were more than surprised, however, to find that those who were both LAC and PEFS had a significantly better outcome than the PEFS alone.

In-depth details of the research can be found in the JSW but, in summary, we compared the longitudinal outcomes of two five-year cohorts of young people – 438 former LAC and 215 Permanently-Excluded-from-School (PEFS) adolescents as young men. This study emerged from a successful school-based social work project. ‘Failure’ on this effective project was measured as permanent school-exclusion from school, a group that would become our comparator against looked-after-children.

So to test whether this result was a fluke or not, we analysed all former LAC, to compare against the PEFS cohort as young men, aged 16-24. The results were based on data from police and social service records, as well as a regional suicide register.

Self-evidently, as adolescents, the LAC would have been more vulnerable than the excluded adolescents; who would otherwise have also been looked-after. However, one key difference
between the two cohorts is that the LAC group had continued social work support, whereas the excluded group had no ongoing, statutory, social work support. Indeed, what often happened in practice was that, rather than receive any direct intervention, there would instead be a collective sigh of relief when the PEFS group reached the age of 16 and were no longer the responsibility of statutory education. These are some of the findings of this comparative research work.

Criminality: In terms of age and social background, the groups were a fairly good match, as 45% and 44% respectively of LAC and PEFS were under the age of 15 when they committed their first offence. However, LAC as men had significantly fewer offences, 44%, compared with the PEFS group’s 64%. More than a quarter of the PEFS cohort (28%) committed 11 or more offences, compared with 22% of the LAC group, but in terms of violent offences, the PEFS sample committed more than double the rate of subsequent violent offences. These offences included ABH, GBH, wounding with an offensive weapon – applicable to 4% of LAC but 17% of PEFS. It should be noted here, however, that 56% of LAC and 36% of PEFS had no known offences at all, so there was a degree of success in regard to both groups in this instance.

Significantly lower
As suggested earlier, one feature of the excluded group was that 20% were also formerly LAC. The importance of social work support may be seen in the outcomes of the young men who had been both LAC and PEFS and who might be assumed to have had the worst outcome. In fact, they actually had a significantly lower crime rate than the group who had been excluded and not looked-after.

On the down side, however, we were able to assess to what degree the two cohorts, as young men, had been victims of crime. Both groups had higher rates than that of the general population, and this was actually slightly higher amongst the LAC cohort. This included being victims of violence, which was associated with those who were living with their formerly abusing families. This may indicate housing difficulties, such as the lack of available, independent accommodation.

Perhaps, knowing what we know now, it is not surprising that, as men, 29% of the LAC had had a custodial prison sentence, compared with 39% of the PEFS group. However, only 12% of former LAC are currently in the criminal justice system, against 22% of PEFS, which seems to indicate that these two subgroups are in the midst of a ‘criminal career’.

Costs: In the imminent round of public spending cuts, a key concern for policy makers will be whether we can afford the service and/or does it save money? Bearing in mind that the looked-after children probably started from a worse situation than the excluded children, the significantly lower levels of subsequent criminality hide considerable ‘savings’ in terms of the cost of both, the actual offence as well as the administration of justice – going to court, appointing barristers, funding legal aid, among other expenses. If, as might have been expected, the LAC had offended at similar rates to the PEFS cohort, then at least £185,000 of savings can be identified in the reduced cost of crime. Moreover, it should be remembered that at this age, young men’s criminal careers still have years to run, thereby increasing the long-term potential savings.

Crucially, the longer that members of either group remain un-integrated into society, or unable to take up mature responsibilities, the greater the challenge they face in breaking the cycle of deprivation – in turn, providing improved life-chances for their own children. Violent deaths of young men previously excluded from school: There are “lies, damned lies and (politicians who abuse) statistics”, as Benjamin Disraeli more or less said, and in the context of this paper, this applies to a major misperception of the rate of violence in the UK. Based upon World Health Organisation (WHO) data, we can make international comparisons of rates of violence. For instance, the UK peak age of male murder is amongst the 15-24 year-olds and currently stands at 14 per million but in the US the rate is 219 per million. In the context of our cohorts, however, a startling statistic emerged. Amongst our previously excluded young men, there were three murderers, giving a rate of 13,889 per million, more than 60 times higher than the US rate, which itself is the highest in the Western world. In addition, using figures from a regional suicide register, it was found that a further two PEFS men were involved in violent deaths, in this case suicide; this gives a rate of 9,259 per million, which is more than 123 times the current UK 15-24 male suicide rate.

It might be argued that finding three murders in such a cohort was a freakish result, as might have been the two suicides amongst the 215 former PEFS, rather than a real reflection of the troubled and troublesome lives of these men. However, to put these deaths into context, to find one murderer by chance would require 73,360 young men (15-24) and to find one suicide would need a further 13,338, yet the previously excluded group had five such violent deaths, highlighting their vulnerability.

Better outcomes
What can we conclude from this unique, comparative study? Firstly, there are real grounds to argue that, on crime rates alone, the outcomes of looked-after children are a reasonable success. This is confirmed by applying Home Office prediction of re-offending rates to the LAC cohort. They were predicted to repeat their most serious crime within two years, and 78% did not do so. On the other hand, we are not being complacent, for though 17% of LAC, as well as 22% of PEFS, continuing a criminal career poses a problem to both society and themselves. However, who would have thought that looked-after children would have a better outcome than another group?

Here are grounds to argue there is ‘micro’ evidence that social work has made a measured difference, to add to the evidence provided by the earlier school-based social work project.

However, what concerns us even more is the situation of former PEFS, who continue to have damaged and damaging lives. Thanks to earlier research, a 1992 study from HMSO, Prepared for Living: A survey of young people leaving care (Biehel N. Clayden J & Stein M), we know the importance of continuing to support looked-after children into early adulthood.

Reflecting on the results of our more recent study it would seem that such a service is needed not just for LAC but also for those who are excluded from school – not only for their benefit, but for us all.

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