The Visibility of a Socio-Economic Dimension in Day-to-Day Child and Family Social Work Practice in Wales

Martin Elliott ⓘ,* Philip Smith, and
Jonathan Scourfield ⓘ

CASCADE, Cardiff University, Maindy Road, Cathays, Cardiff CF24 4HQ, UK

*Correspondence to Martin Elliott, CASCADE, Cardiff University, Maindy Road, Cathays, Cardiff, CF24 4HQ, UK. E-mail: ElliottMC1@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

This study explored how day-to-day social work practice with children and families in Wales responds to poverty, building on case studies already published in the other three UK nations. A case study design was used. The sites were locality teams in two local authorities, differing in their children looked after rates and trajectories of these over time. Qualitative research methods included practice observations; interviews with staff; focus groups; mapping of decision-making processes; and a sample of family case narratives. In one local authority, the range of data was similar to the other UK nation case studies. However, in the second, data collection was adapted to the coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) lockdown context. Some evidence was found of narratives that emphasised the cultural, rather than material, aspect of poverty, and blamed parents for making inappropriate spending choices. Poverty alleviation was generally seen as outside of social workers' control and requiring earlier help before social services involvement. In one of the local authorities, there was some awareness shown of the impact of poverty on parenting. In the other, that took part in the study during 2020, the exacerbating effects of families in lockdown were described, including the lack of family support due to pandemic restrictions.

Keywords: child protection, child welfare, community, inequality, out-of-home care, poverty

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Introduction

There is evidence showing that the children and families with whom so-cial workers work are overwhelmingly from the poorest neighbourhoods. That this is the case appears to be seen within the profession and more widely as unremarkable. Poverty has been described as the 'wallpaper of practice: too big to tackle and too familiar to notice' (Morris *et al.*, 2018, p. 370). This is perhaps why in the UK, until relatively recently, the rela-tionship between deprivation and the likelihood of contact with statutory children's services and the resulting inequalities have been relatively under-researched. In recent decades, it has also been argued that social work practice has become overly focused on individualistic approaches that firmly locate risks and support needs within families, with scrutiny of parental behaviour, but little attention paid to structural factors and the environments within which families live (Holland *et al.* 2011; Disney and Lloyd, 2020). This article summarises findings from an exploratory study conducted in two local authorities (LAs) in Wales. The study aimed to replicate, as far as possible, the methods used in mixed meth-ods case studies conducted in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Morris *et al.* 2018; Mason *et al.* 2021) as part of a larger-scale UK-wide study of inequalities in child welfare, the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP).

The use of a social inequalities lens is well-established internationally in both health and education research in the UK (Halsey *et al.*, 1980; Marmot and Wilkinson, 2005). However, its use in child welfare research in the UK is relatively underdeveloped, although it has had relatively more attention in the US (e.g. Coulton *et al.*, 2007; Berger and Waldfogel, 2011). The CWIP considered inequalities in children's social care and established that there is an unequal pattern of child welfare in-tervention rates across the four UK nations and concluded that families' socio-economic circumstances were an important contributory factor in children's chances of being subject to child protection procedures or placed in out-of-home care (Bywaters *et al.*, 2018; Bywaters *et al.*, 2020). These findings were also replicated in a subsequent study of longitudinal children's social care data conducted in Wales (Elliott, 2020). Prior to the insights provided by the CWIP's linking of children's services admin-istrative data to the index of multiple deprivation data, relatively few large UK studies had examined evidence of an association between pov-erty and related inequalities, and child abuse and neglect (Bebbington and Miles, 1989; Gillham *et al.*, 1998; Sidebotham *et al.*, 2002). Both the CWIP and Elliott's studies, through their quantitative analysis of rou-tinely collected administrative data, identified a 'social gradient' in child welfare interventions (Marmot and Wilkinson, 2005). That is to say that for each step increase in levels of neighbourhood-level deprivation, there is a corresponding increase in rates of children being subject to child

protection procedures or being placed in out-of-home care (looked after).

In the CWIP study, this 'social gradient' was observed in all four UK home nations but was steepest in Wales, hence the focus of the study that is the subject of this article on exploring and describing how Welsh social workers work with poverty in their day-to-day practice and decision making. This social gradient persists regardless of how the data are disaggregated, for example, by local authority, sex, age, etc. Within the context of Wales, a child living in the 10 per cent most deprived 'neighbourhoods' is on average almost twelve times more likely to become 'looked after' than their peers living in the ten percent of least deprived neighbourhoods (Elliott, 2017). Furthermore, whilst there is evidence of a relationship between deprivation and all forms of children's social care intervention in the UK (Goldacre and Hood, 2022), relatively little is understood in the UK context about if and how social workers take account of poverty in their day-to-day practice and decision making. For example, in the context of families where there are concerns regarding neglect, Burgess *et al.* (2014) highlighted that socio-economic factors were frequently missing within assessments of families. Alongside the quantitative analysis of routinely collected administrative data in the four nations undertaken for the CWIP study, mixed methods case studies were also undertaken in LAs in England and Scotland with the aim of exploring the inequalities identified and how they are reflected in day-to-day practice and decision making. How social workers understand the relationship between poverty and the families they come into contact with, and those families' support needs was also explored (Morris *et al.*, 2018). Subsequently, further funding was identified to undertake case studies using the same methodology in Northern Ireland (Mason *et al.*, 2021), where despite high levels of deprivation, the social gradient is the shallowest. Undertaking our study in Wales using the same methodology has meant that comparable case study data have been collected in all four nations (albeit undertaken at different time points) that can now sit alongside the equivalent quantitative analysis.

Rates of children looked after in Wales remain high, with one Welsh local authority having the highest rates of children in care in the UK and rates overall being on average higher than those in England. There are a number of factors that are cited as potential contributors to this situation including more children in kinship care or placed at home than in England (Hodges and Scourfield, 2023). There are also significant variations in rates within Wales and a survey conducted by Wood and Forrester (2023) found an association between practitioner values and reducing rates linked to LAs adopting a practice framework. However, whilst having higher rates of children in care than in England, Wales also has higher levels of non-safeguarding spending, despite the impact of austerity (Hodges and Scourfield, 2023). Concerns about the high

levels of children in care have led to Wales's First Minister calling for LAs to safely reduce their numbers of children in care. Each local authority being tasked with developing a strategic plan promoting a shift towards more prevention and better support for children to remain with their families (Welsh Government, 2019), although at the time of writing, there has been relatively little progress. These efforts to reduce rates of out-of-home care are also being made against the backdrop of Wales having the highest relative poverty rates in the UK (Elliott, 2021).

A number of key issues and themes are identified by the Morris *et al.* (2018) case studies in England and Scotland. First, respondents were often able, once prompted, to articulate their own understandings of the relationship between the socio-economic circumstances of the families with which they worked and the harms they experienced. However, it was also apparent that often such understandings were 'obscured, blocked, or avoided in individual case work and social work decision making' (p. 4). The role of organisational constraints, such as caseloads and budgets, was also highlighted. Where there was acknowledgement of the impact of families' socio-economic circumstances, and an aspiration to practice in ways that were poverty aware, respondents often felt overwhelmed by poverty within a context of increasing demand for services and diminishing resources.

The study by Mason *et al.* (2021) specifically focused on possible explanations for Northern Ireland experiencing the highest levels of deprivation, whilst having the lowest rates of children in out-of-home care of the UK nations. Possible explanations focused on a number of factors intersecting at multiple levels. These included social workers with high levels of poverty awareness, although this did not always feature in assessments and decision making; poverty aware systems, including routine access to income maximisation advice; early help and support services that were resourced appropriately for the levels of presenting need; and community cohesion and social capital.

In undertaking our study, we have also taken a position that acknowledges poverty is not just the lack of material resources, but also needs to be understood in the context of the relational and the symbolic (Gupta *et al.*, 2018). ATD Fourth World has described the experience of living in poverty in the context of six dimensions: systems, structures and policies that disempower; financial insecurity, financial exclusion and debt; damage to health and well-being; stigma, blame and judgement; lack of control over choices; and a lack of recognition of struggles, skills and contributions (ATD Fourth World, 2019). This framework also provided a lens through which we considered the social work practice observed and considered the extent to which these dimensions are acknowledged and addressed, visible or invisible or potentially compounded by day-to-day practice.

Methods

The aim of the study was to explore how routine child and family social work practice in Wales responds to poverty, building on the qualitative research already conducted for the UK-wide study in the other three UK nations.

A mixed methods case study research design was used. The case studies were based on locality social work teams within two Welsh local authorities. The choice of locality teams as the unit of analysis rather than LAs was to allow consideration of variation between geographies within a local authority as well as broader comparisons between local authorities. The two LAs in which these teams were located were authorities identified as having substantially different rates of children 'looked after' and differing trajectories regarding rates of children in care over time. One of the authorities (Dyffryn) is in the 50 per cent of Welsh LAs containing the highest proportions of Lower Super Output Areas in the 10 per cent most deprived, whilst the other is in the lower 50 per cent (Mynydd) (Stats Wales, 2019). Based on the ONS mid-year population estimate for 2020, the child populations (zero to sixteen years) of LAs in Wales vary from 10,852 to 70,181. Dyffryn has one of the 50 per cent largest child populations, whilst Mynydd is in the 50 per cent with the smallest child populations (Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2023). The fieldwork design was the same as that adopted in the Nuffield Foundation-funded CWIP study.

The planned fieldwork in the case study sites involved a range of activities, including:

- practice observations.
- semi-structured interviews with social workers, team managers and senior managers
- focus groups based around a standardised case vignette (the same vignette used in the other home nations)
- mapping of decision-making processes
- collection of a sample of family case narratives

The case study sites within the two LAs were identified using a population-weighted UK-wide Index of Multiple Deprivation developed as part of CWIP and based on the model proposed by Payne and Abel (2012). This was used to account for the differences between nations in the way that each country calculates its Index of Multiple Deprivation. A locality site comprised three clustered population census geographies (Medium Super Output Areas) with the same or closely similar spread of deprivation scores as the other case study sites, both between sites in Wales and between study sites selected in the other three nations. The sites were also identified based on making geographical sense to each

local authority. Each research site had an overall population of approximately 22,000. In addition to this main site, fieldwork was also undertaken by the locality social work team that worked in the least deprived neighbourhoods within the local authority and in the most deprived (where that was not included in the main research site). In addition to the principal social work teams working with families in the geographies chosen, we also identified other teams to take part in the research who, as part of their remit, worked with children in the research sites identified, but who often covered a much bigger geographic area. These included: a Looked After Children's Team; a Front Door Team who dealt with initial referrals and the allocation of caseloads; and a Rapid Response Team who provided early help work with families.

To be consistent with the fieldwork undertaken in the other three UK nations, all the data collected were organised and analysed using the same framework approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). A fuller description of the approach as it was applied to the CWIP and therefore to this study, is provided in Mason *et al.* (2020) and consequently only a broad outline is provided here. Initial codes were generated using a mix of theoretical and inductive coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and again drew on the earlier case studies. Examples of *a priori* themes under which data were coded in each of the four nations included.

Poverty evident in discourse (unprovoked) Social workers independently and directly consider poverty as part of their work with families (could be to do with circumstances, effects or support strategies, such as debt management).

Consequences of poverty as a risk factor are not addressed—Blaming narratives that do not feature consideration or understanding of the family's socio-economic circumstances.

Caseloads and staff structures—included a code to capture narratives around emotional labour/burnout experienced by staff.

The participating LAs are not identified and are instead pseudonymised to preserve their anonymity. The two local authorities will be called 'Dyffryn' and 'Mynydd'. Dyffryn was a local authority that had historically had high rates of children in out-of-home care, but which in the years preceding the study had seen those rates reduce. In contrast, whilst Mynydd was a local authority that had never had low rates of children in care, their rates of children 'looked after' had increased significantly prior to the study. Fieldwork conducted in 'Dyffryn' consisted of sixty-eight hours of practice observations over nine days; twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with social workers, team managers and senior managers; five focus groups; collection of ten family case narratives—pen pictures of a selection of families with which teams were working; and production of a decision-making process map. Fieldwork in 'Mynydd' was affected by the pandemic, the imposition of the national lockdown in March 2020 just as fieldwork was planned to start, and

subsequently the additional pressures placed on social work teams adapting to new ways of working. Whilst it was eventually possible to undertake twelve online interviews with practitioners and managers within the timeframe for the research, it was not possible to spend time in locality offices to observe practice and undertake focus groups in the way envisaged, as teams largely continued to work from home and had limited capacity to engage with researchers. The fieldwork was also revised to take additional account of the impact of COVID-19, and interview schedules were amended to also capture how practitioners felt that the socio-economic circumstances of the families they worked with had been affected by the pandemic and again if and how that was represented in their assessments, decision making and provision of services.

Ethical approval for undertaking the study was granted by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

The impact of the prevailing political and socio-economic backdrop on social work practice with families and the resources available to those families is captured in the following quote from a social worker working in the most deprived neighbourhoods in Dyffryn:

> that's the thing…. the political and economic situation affects us massively because the less money there is around the less money we have to help and the less money that people out there have, then the harder life gets for everybody, which is not the best. (Dyffryn Most Deprived Site Social Worker_001)

The fieldwork in Wales, undertaken between September 2019 and November 2020, was conducted several years after the original Child Welfare Inequalities Project was conducted and the findings were published widely, both in academic journals but also in the wider UK media (see, e.g. BBC News, 2017: Poor children 'more likely to be in care'). The original study also resulted in the development of practitioner materials aimed at making practice more poverty aware. For example, the British Association of Social Workers Anti-Poverty Practice Guide for Social Work and the Anti-Poverty Practice Framework for Social Work in Northern Ireland (Morrison *et al.*, 2018; BASW and CWIP, 2019). Arguably, therefore, discussion of family's socio-economic circumstances and their relevance for social work practice were more foregrounded during the period leading up to the study being undertaken in Wales than during the period in which the original case studies in England and Scotland were conducted in 2015. We could therefore perhaps reasonably expect to observe social work practice which is more poverty aware in nature or at least an increased awareness of socio-economic

circumstances as a practice issue. However, whilst we observed many examples of poverty-aware practice, which may or may not be attributable to the attention focused on child welfare inequalities in recent years, many of the negative examples illustrated in the original case study findings were still present. These included blaming narratives and the 'othering' of families with which they worked.

Blaming narratives

In common with the case studies undertaken by Morris *et al.* (2018), we found examples of social workers using blaming narratives, 'othering' of those families with whom they worked; or making generalisations about the neighbourhoods or streets within which they lived and the people that lived in them. Specifically, we also observed examples of Wacquant's (2008) 'territorial stigmatisation'. For example, the following excerpts:

> I also think there's some social norms as well, cultural norms in the area. (Dyffryn Main Site Social Worker_008)

> … there's a lot of engrained generational poverty … grandfathers haven't worked, and grandmothers haven't worked, that's created fathers and mothers that don't work which are creating children that don't work. (Dyffryn Main Site Social Worker_006)

> When I say impoverished, I mean, not just financially … . but sometimes, you know like morally and spiritually. (Mynydd Least Deprived Site Social Worker_001)

These are observations which arguably also have their roots in individualistic explanations of poverty, based on the ideas of Lewis's (1959) cultures or cycles of poverty, or more recently Murray's (1996) ideas of 'underclass'. Some social workers' narratives reflected Edwards *et al.*'s (2015) ideas of an increasing intensification of parental blame in which parents, and in particular mothers, are seen as being solely to blame for the poverty and deprivation faced by themselves and their children.

> In this area I've noticed there's a huge issue with immediate gratification you know they're buying things through Brighthouse and then that's how there's massive financial issues because you know the priorities in terms of finances are not as they should be. (Dyffryn Main Site Social Worker_007)

> The thing is they all say they're struggling with their finances … they've got the best Kappa tracksuit and new trainers … Their house is squalor, but they've got a 50-inch Brighthouse TV. (Dyffryn Most Deprived Site Focus Group)

… people struggling just from lack of money … usually because they are mis-spending money … getting things on tick so they have to pay back on a higher rate … a lot of them smoke so that's quite expensive … the money is going in the wrong places. (Dyffryn Main Site Social Worker_005)

I think we are seeing more DV, we are seeing more like drug and alcohol use, even though they have got no money, they find the money for that. They seem to be able to get that. (Mynydd Main Site/Most Deprived Site Social Worker_002)

Poverty: A role for social workers?

Whilst there is a demonstrable relationship between poverty and child maltreatment (Bunting *et al.*, 2018), to avoid further stigmatising families it needs to be acknowledged that not all parents who raise children in deprived households are 'poor parents' and require additional support or surveillance by statutory services. However, it has also been argued that this position can have the effect of minimising the impact of poverty and again placing the focus solely on families, by highlighting that many parents parent in poverty without needing or receiving interventions by the state (Hyslop and Keddell, 2018).

> Just because you haven't got money doesn't mean you need a social worker. (Dyffryn Least Deprived Site Focus Group)

This quote from a social worker in Dyffryn was in response to the discussion of whether poverty should be a central focus for social work. In the context of the focus group discussion in which this comment was made, this response reflected a view of practice focused on individuals, not their wider socio-economic context. The implication of the social worker's statement is that poverty is not the reason families have support needs, but rather the focus should be on parental behaviour.

There was a clear divide amongst those social workers spoken to as to whether alleviating poverty was viewed as a central part of their professional role. The agreed international definition of social work includes the alleviation of the effects of poverty as a central pillar (IFSW, 2014). Consideration of whether poverty should be, and is, a central focus for social work practice and decision making becomes particularly troublesome where the main reason for social work involvement is child neglect, as poverty and neglect are inextricably linked (Gupta, 2017). In 2020, during the period of data collection for the study, 44 per cent of children on the child protection register in Wales had a registration category that included neglect (Stats Wales, 2020). When considered in the wider context of elements of neglectful parenting being present in many

social work cases, the presence of neglect and of poverty represents a significant proportion of all work undertaken by social workers.

> There's little we can do about poverty because there's so many families out there that are living in this situation and there's not enough money in the pot to do everything that we can for them. And we are then just like battling the knock-on effect of the poverty which is the mental health and the home conditions and the neglect because, but in terms of the poverty I don't see how we can affect change there, that has to come from higher up with the government. (Dyffryn Main Site Focus Group)

Some participants suggested that providing material help at the point at which families become known to statutory children's services was too late and would make little impact on the outcome of their involvement. There was also a desire amongst some practitioners to be providers of early help and support to families and a recognition of the benefits of providing such support much earlier.

> We try to change things after everything has already taken place. We go in too late. I don't mean like put everyone on the child protection register but I mean let's go in early and support families before they get to the point, they need us. (Dyffryn Main Site Focus Group)

However, the early help that is routinely available did not often seem to be of a material nature but was more focused on parenting.

Poverty awareness

In the Morris *et al.* (2018) study, practitioners recognised the case study sites as both neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation and routine sites for a large proportion of their practice. Once prompted, practitioners described poverty as 'entrenched, systemic, and "generational"' (p. 3). Similar narratives were reflected in the accounts of participants in the Welsh study.

Such acknowledgement of the poorest neighbourhoods as the predominant sites of practice and a driver of the need for support of families arguably highlights the need for practice that is in some sense poverty aware. The extent to which poverty-aware practice was evident during fieldwork was variable across the two Welsh local authorities. In Dyffryn, the social workers talked about the way the local authority had adopted strengths-based approaches to practice, which had a central focus on the family context. This contrasts with examples of practice more rooted in neo-liberal ideas of locating blame for problems within individuals and households, irrespective of the wider societal context of families (Gupta *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, workers often demonstrated an awareness of the relationship between poverty and a range of factors that would impact on ability to parent effectively, although these were

not always evident in practice and required prompting when discussed. However, once prompted, many participants could clearly articulate the struggles that some parents in poverty encounter and the ways in which that might result in a need for additional support, either material or more broadly, how those were provided, and their impact.

> The mum will require support to ensure her income is maximised and that she can access all the benefits that she is entitled to, leading up to the birth—maternity grants, housing benefits etc. (Dyffryn Main Site Focus Group)

> You know on one occasion we bought a suit for a father to go to an interview because it just fitted in with the plan for that family and it was the best thing that ever happened really because he got the job, and the family went from strength to strength. (Dyffryn Main Site Team Manager)

> …Universal Credit, when that came in, that caused a lot of problems in terms of people waiting a long time without money. And you know we would help out with things like erm maybe being able to help people get furniture, we'd go to local upcycle projects… (Mynydd Least Deprived Site Team Manager)

> I think on a practical level stuff like, you have XXXXXXXX in the area which helps with goods, getting furniture. You'd be surprised how many families want carpets and flooring… they've taken a bit of pride in their house…it is amazing…you can see the sort of difference…If I can get a family a nice carpet and floorboards…cheap paint…re-used paint, £2 a litre. "Great, I can paint my living room, oh wow." And they feel in a better place to talk because things around them aren't stressing them out. So, I think practical stuff like that's great. (Mynydd Rapid Response Team Social Worker_001)

There were also examples of social workers being able to clearly articulate how they located the support needs of families within their broader context. For example, in discussing the vignette in one of the focus groups, a social worker provided the following reflection on the families' circumstances and their wider context:

> Is it because he's lost his job, they've got no secure income, you know she's battling with a 3-year -old trying to keep on top of everything and she's got a bit low mood and he's low in mood which is why he's drinking which is then affecting the family circumstances and it's a vicious cycle. So, it's about unpicking what's behind it really, isn't it? (Dyffryn Front Door Team Focus Group)

Such poverty awareness was less present in the accounts of practice from those working in Mynydd, where rates of children in out-of-home care were very high and increasing, although it should be noted that the data collection method was different because of COVID-19 restrictions

and the subsequent pressures on practitioners, making direct comparison more problematic.

Social work, socio-economic circumstances and the pandemic

Social workers talked about the ways in which they regularly undertook a significant proportion of their work in specific streets, neighbourhoods and communities within the local authority. The pre-COVID-19 data collection highlighted that some social workers, particularly those in teams offering longer term support, often lacked detailed knowledge and awareness of communities and the locally based support services. Some participants highlighted the presence of a team 'guru', the person in the office everyone turned to for detailed knowledge of the area. An increase in remote working during the pandemic in the local authority where the study was conducted, combined with the emergence nationally of local community responses to the impact of COVID-19, which social workers were often unaware of, meant potentially that this lack of awareness was exacerbated.

> I haven't been in my area, I've been working from home, so it's quite difficult to know whether those sorts of things have happened. (Mynydd Least Deprived Site Team Manager)

Social workers in 'Mynydd', where data collection took place during lockdown, felt that referrals increased because more families were struggling during the pandemic, particularly those living in poverty who did not have the 'economic flexibility' to cope with the pandemic. Many family members had been furloughed, and with lockdown in place, families were spending all their time in the home together. Families that had been on the brink, but managing pre-pandemic, had now 'gone under' due to the loss of early support provision. Several levels of support disappeared for families during the pandemic, including the suspension of Families First (a Welsh Government early help programme), school closures and the lack of immediate support and care from family and friends, due to social distancing measures:

> People relying so much on family and grandparents and maybe aunts and uncles and that generational support … with that, with the restrictions not allowing them to use that support, I think that's compounded people's mental health issues as well. (Mynydd Rapid Response Team Manager)

> I think school really propped that family up a lot. Those children had good school attendance and school was a safety measure really and I think when that went … that led to it being tipped over the edge … There was a domestic incident between the parents … home conditions

took a massive slide. And they had to act… (Mynydd Least Deprived
Site Team Manager)

There were examples of social workers providing increased levels of
material help and support to families during the pandemic, which reflects
the findings of Ferguson *et al.* (2020) from their study on social distanc-
ing and risks from COVID-19. As highlighted by the Ferguson *et al.*
study, there were also clear examples of social work practice adapting to
new digital ways of working with families using WhatsApp, Zoom and
other platforms. However, there was also a feeling expressed by some
participants that 'I need to be in the homes with families' Mynydd
Rapid Response Social Worker_003 rather than working remotely.

Community cohesion and social capital

In their exploration of the rates of children in out-of-home care in
Northern Ireland, Mason *et al.* (2021) identify levels of community cohe-
sion and social capital as a possible explanatory factor. In the Welsh
fieldwork sites, arguably the reverse was illustrated. One example of fac-
tors that contributed to a lack of social cohesion and social capital was
related to the availability of social housing.

> I'm also aware that um there is housing availability in the North and
> that creates a problem of its own because you have people coming from
> other areas, into XXXXXX because we've got available housing.

> Perhaps if people are moving from refuges into places like XXXXXX,
> they have got no family support in this area. (Mynydd Main Site/Most
> Deprived Site Social Worker_002)

> … with my families they're very isolated. The one particular family that
> I work with has family support, but they don't live in that area. I don't
> think any of them have got family support around actually. (Dyffryn
> Main Site Social Worker_003)

Practitioners talked about the impact of transitory populations as a re-
sult of families being moved to areas with housing stock, often a long
way from their family and social networks.

Discussion

This article seeks to contribute towards the growing consideration in re-
cent years of social work practice where social workers are faced daily
with disproportionate numbers of children and their families who are im-
pacted negatively by poverty, whether directly through a lack of financial
resources or indirectly by the impact of living in poverty on parental
mental health (Gould, 2006), substance misuse (Murali and Oyebode,

2004) or domestic violence (Towers, 2015). There is an increasing consensus that poverty is a contributory causal factor in child abuse and neglect (Bywaters *et al.*, 2016). A recent review found the risk of child maltreatment to be associated with specific economic insecurities: income loss, cumulative material hardship and housing hardship (Skinner *et al.*, 2023).

Years of austerity have both impacted the resources available to some families to parent effectively and on local authorities' ability to respond to families' needs for additional support. These things have happened at a time where the drivers of social work practice have been increasingly risk-focused, with those risks firmly located within the parental home, with limited consideration of those issues within their wider socioeconomic context. Moreover, at a national policy level, not only is there little acknowledgement of the impact of austerity and poverty but government ministers, such as Michael Gove, have actively sought to reduce consideration of such factors, arguing that to do so is to reduce the individual responsibilities of parents.

> It robs individuals of the power of agency and breaks the link between an individual's actions and the consequences. It risks explaining away substance abuse, domestic violence, and personal irresponsibility, rather than doing away with them. (Gove, 2013)

There have been calls for a rebalancing of practice. The 'Social Model of Child Protection' described by Featherstone *et al.* (2018), for example, calls for a return to more humane practice with families, which places the needs of families within their wider socio-economic context, rather than the perceived narrow focus on risk located within the home. Whilst acknowledging that often the levers and resources to influence families' socio-economic circumstances are beyond social workers and local authorities, there is still much that can be done in terms of practising in ways that are humane and in which social workers get alongside families. Whilst many of the drivers of families' socio-economic circumstances are beyond what social work practice can influence, social work can be practised in ways that acknowledge the wider impacts of poverty, avoid exacerbating them, and where possible ameliorate them, by providing material help or advocating for this from other agencies. Social workers need to be alert to the psycho-social context of stigma, shame and guilt (Gibson, 2015) and their interactions with families need to avoid further compounding these. Practice needs to be supported by systems and policies which do not further disempower; as far as possible, it should provide control over choices. And from a strengths-based perspective, practitioners need to acknowledge the struggles, skills, and contributions of those subject to social work intervention (ATD Fourth World, 2019). Krumer-Nevo (2020) outlines the various elements of poverty-aware practice in her book *Radical Hope*.

However, whilst there is a need to strive towards social work assessment and decision-making practices that reflect and respond to the material circumstances of families and work in ways that recognise and respect the day-to-day realities of living and parenting in poverty, there is also a need for social policy that explicitly seek to reduce poverty. Local authorities in Wales have some of the highest rates of children in out-of-home care in the UK and some of the highest concentrations of poverty. Whilst key matters such as tax and benefits are not devolved to Wales by the UK Government in Westminster, there are several areas where action can be taken by the Welsh Government to support families and reduce poverty.

Study limitations

The impact of the pandemic on data collection meant that we were unable to engage fully in the within-Wales comparative aspects of the study with respect to comparing the data collected in the two local authorities. This was both because that would have required comparing pre-COVID-19 data with data collected during the pandemic and because of the curtailing of fieldwork in the second authority because of lockdown restrictions, particularly the direct observations of practice. There were still, however, some opportunities to compare data collected in the pre-pandemic fieldwork site with published findings from the earlier Child Welfare Inequalities Project undertaken in the other UK home nations and that comparison is drawn on in the discussion presented here. Additionally, the numbers of interviews carried out in the second local authority were not unsubstantial ($n = 12$) and provided a body of additional data on the overall focus of the study, along with additional insights on the impact of the pandemic on poverty and practice. We do, however, acknowledge the impact of the exceptional circumstances during which these interviews were undertaken, and the potential implications on reliability and validity.

Conclusion

Our study replicated qualitative research on child welfare inequalities in social work practice that had already been conducted in other UK nations and found similar themes in Wales of tackling poverty being seen as beyond social work control and some blaming narratives that focused on the cultural dimension of living in poverty. In one of the local authorities, however, there was awareness shown of the impact of poverty on parenting. A part of the study was carried out during COVID-19 lockdowns which limited the insights that could be gained but some

interesting points were made about that unique situation. More work is needed to develop and evaluate poverty-aware practices that social workers can use day-to-day in the challenging context of statutory child and family social work.

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