

Submission to the Sub Committee on Children's Rights of the Legislative Council

Data Bank of Out-of-home Care Children

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WHY DATA MATTER

Data are more than numbers. Data provide important information about people's needs, which is essential to plan public policies and ensure a fair and an effective distribution of resources. For the development of policies and services for children in care in Hong Kong, it is necessary to establish a reliable and a sustainable database in order to have better informed decisions, plan targeted interventions that address the special needs of these children, and sustain their development into healthy and a strong adults.

DATA BANKS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

In countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, a strong, comprehensive and accessible system for providing information regarding out-of-home care children^{1 2} has already been built. Other places, such as Australia, have also reported relevant data on children in care regularly³. The purposes for establishing the data bank are not only to record general information such as the number of looked-after children, data on placements, and legal status, but also to analyze the phenomenon of out-of-home care services. For example, why is the educational attainment of children in care poor; why is there a large proportion of aboriginal children in care? Based on this information, the government is able to review the services and to formulate relevant policies and services for these vulnerable children.

1 Gov. UK: Statistics - Looked after children. Retrieved from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children>

2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - Children's Bureau – Adoption and Foster Care Statistics.

Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/afcars>

3 Commonwealth of Australia (2015). The Senate, Community Affairs References Committee, Out-of-home care.

Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/nfpac/out-of-home-care/data/>

CURRENT SIUTATION IN HONG KONG

1) Data is limited in scope

Currently, the data regarding out-of-home care children in Hong Kong is mainly collected from the Referral forms used by the Central Referral System for Residential Child Care Services (CRSRC)⁴, the Referral forms for Schools for Social Development / Residential Homes (i.e. Boys' / Girls' Homes with school on site)⁵ and the Statistical Information System (SIS). Whereas the first two forms are mainly for assessing a child's eligibility for placement (such as placement choice, whether or not an urgent placement is needed etc.), the third one is for service monitoring purposes (such as rates of placement occupancy, scheduled case reviews, individual work plans). The limited coverage of the current data is hardly able to achieve the goal of providing systematic information for planning and development that is one of the main purposes of the establishment of data bank of these children⁶.

2) Data is incomplete

A high quality and a reliable data set not only shows the actual circumstances but also advances our knowledge of the situations of out-of-home care children. Nevertheless, there is still a large gap in the data in our current database. The following are some examples of the missing data⁷:

- Number of children in residential care because of a Care or Protection Order;
- Number of children placed in residential care by parental consent before a Care or Protection Order was made;
- Number of sibling placements;
- Number of different types of disabilities of children in care;
- Number of children with special needs;

4 The Referral form for Central Referral System for Residential Child Care Services. Retrieved from <http://www.sbchcsms.edu.hk/pdf/Admission/Crsrc.pdf>

5 The Referral form for Schools for Social Development / Residential Homes. Retrieved from http://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/edu-system/special/support-subsidy/special-school/ccrm/ssd_5_application%20form_eng.pdf

6 Social Welfare Department (1998). The Manual of Central Referral System for Residential Child Care Service, p. 1.

7 These questions are extracted from the document on the "Replies to questions raised by Finance Committee Members in examining the Estimates of Expenditure 2015-16".

- Number of children living on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme;
- Number of children receiving specialized services (e.g., clinical psychology service, educational psychology service, psychiatric service);
- The average time children spent in a care facility before they are adopted; and
- Number of adoptive parents for children with special needs.

3) *Data is unsustainable*

The quality of the care and its effectiveness should be shown by the outcomes of children during the care and post-care periods. Some countries, like the United Kingdom, will follow up on the children for at least 12 months in order to understand their psychosocial outcomes after being discharged. Therefore, the data should be able to inform us regarding the post-care outcomes of these children. The following are some missing items in our data bank:

- Number of care leavers that leave homes after family reunification;
- Number of care leavers that re-enter a care facility;
- Length of time the reunification lasts before the child re-enters a care facility;
- Reasons for re-entering a care facility;
- Number of care leavers who dropout from schools;
- Frequency of truancy among care leavers / absences from school / having school exclusions; and
- Number of care leavers attempting or committing suicide / abusing substances / externalizing behavior problems.

4) *Data is inaccessible*

The availability and the accessibility of current data is very limited. Most of the data is restricted and the available data is very limited in scope. For instance, the Social Welfare Department only publishes very basic information about the services, which consists of residential childcare services units and numbers of cases⁸. It is understandable that the confidentiality of subject data must be

⁸ Social Welfare Department (2015). Social Welfare Services in Figures.

ensured when the government publishes the data. However, with reference to the practice in social science research, there are some strategies for protecting the subjects, including:

- Use codes instead of recording identifying information;
- Encrypt identifiable data;
- Limit access to identifiable information;
- Properly and securely store data; and / or
- Assign security codes to computerized records.

5) Data collection process is uninformative

We must set up a data bank from a perspective of inclusion; otherwise, the data will remain incomplete, uninformative and unfair to the marginalized groups in society. Apart from the involvement of key stakeholders (e.g., government bureaus / departments; social services agencies / organizations), the participation of the children involved is vitally significant. In particular, the voices of these children are always unheard by adults and they tend to be left behind by society. Involving the children can ensure that the data being collected is significant for the planning and development of services.

6) Data is uncoordinated

In the United Kingdom, some scholars have advocated the combination and the disaggregation of education and care statistics in order to show the proportions of care leavers with different characteristics (gender, ethnicity etc.) attaining different levels of qualification up to the age of 25⁹. In Hong Kong, there are different departments / bureaus such as the Maternal and Child Health Centers of the Department of Health, the Education Bureau, the Child Abuse Registry, and the CRSRC that keep a data set that may be relevant to children in care. To make better use

⁹ Jackson, S. & Cameron, C. (2011). Final Report of the YIPPEE Project W12: Young People from Public Care Background: Pathways to Further and Higher Education in Five European Countries. UK: University of London.

of the data already available, it is important that the data be disaggregated and presented in a coordinated manner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the importance of data for ensuring the quality, the planning and the development of services for out-of-home care children, I urge an immediate response as follows:

- 1) Set up a working committee for reviewing the current scope of data being collected, data collection methodologies, data analysis methods and data protection and accessibility mechanisms;
- 2) Involve key stakeholders and children in the review process; and
- 3) Formulate a work plan with timeline to refine our current data bank system.