



Child and Youth Officer

f o r B r i t i s h C o l u m b i a

ISSUE PAPER 3

Towards Knowing How Effectively the British Columbia Government Is Supporting Children and Youth

Issue

The provincial government spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year on services to support children, youth and their families, yet it cannot reliably state how effective these services are.

One way to evaluate the effectiveness of government-funded services is to collect data about the services, link that data through the individual service recipients to data about outcomes for children and youth, and then explore what the data tells us about whether government-funded services result in better outcomes for children and youth.

During the course of its work through its various ministries, the government of British Columbia collects a great deal of individually identifiable data about services and outcomes for children and youth. It also expends, within its ministries, considerable resources on research.

How can government use the data and resources available to increase its knowledge about how effective it is in supporting children and youth?

Background

- The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), which began in 1994 and is jointly conducted by Statistics Canada and Social Development Canada, is a long-term study of Canadian children that follows their development and well-being from birth to early adulthood. It has a provincial database large enough to support conclusions relevant to British Columbia.
- Provincial and territorial directors of child welfare across Canada have been working on the Client Outcomes in Child Welfare (COCW) Project, including the development of a child welfare outcome indicator framework that proposes measuring outcomes for children involved with the child welfare system in four broad domains: child safety, child well-being, permanence, and family and community support.



- As part of British Columbia's child and youth mental health plan, a research team led by researchers from the University of British Columbia's Mental Health Evaluation and Community Consultation Unit (Mheccu) is currently working on identifying numerous outcome indicators (including ones similar to those identified in the COCW Project). They propose to work with, among other data sets, the NLSCY British Columbia data and data collected by government about service contacts with individual children and youth in the health, education, and child and family development areas.
- With respect to child maltreatment, in the United States, the Children's Bureau in the federal Department of Health and Human Services annually compiles a range of information about child maltreatment and protection services by state, collected from protection agencies.
- In Canada, the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect conducts a cross-Canada survey of child maltreatment, on a sample basis, collecting information similar to the US data directly from frontline workers. Health Canada reported the first findings of this study in 2001. A second report is expected to be released in fall 2005. The continued funding of this initiative is uncertain.
- The findings of the Canadian Incidence Study are not broken down by province, but British Columbia is one of three provinces that provided additional resources for over-sampling, thereby allowing British Columbia to usefully analyze data on the provincial level.
- British Columbia has a wealth of research units attached to academic institutions that hold and share a multitude of data sets that are of value in analyzing the relationship between services and outcomes for children and youth. Among these research units are a number connected with the University of British Columbia, including: Edudata Canada, Centre for Health Services and Policy Research (CHSPR), Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) and Mheccu.
- The Population Health and Learning Observatory (PHLO), based at the University of British Columbia and 40% funded by the provincial government, was established in 2004 to provide new insights and discoveries about population health and learning determinants and how they interrelate. Under the leadership of Dr. Clyde Hertzman, PHLO seeks to bring together educational, health services and early development data in order to track the health, development and educational success of all British Columbia children from birth to entry into the labour force.
- Important research activity is also taking place outside academic institutions through child and youth research networks, societies, foundations, councils and advocacy organizations. The McCreary Centre Society, for example, conducts extensive research on the physical and emotional health of youth.
- The Inter-ministerial Data Exchange Strategy (IDES), initiated in June 2004, is a project of the provincial Deputy Ministers' Committee on Health, Communities and Safety to facilitate cross-ministry sharing of client service data to answer strategic questions.



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- One of the initiatives of the Social Program Integration Team, established by the Premier's office in August 2004, was the integration across ministries of information about social services.
 - The Child and Youth Officer has a mandate to independently observe services for children and youth and their families, and the statutory right to any government information required to perform her duties. The information obtained by the Child and Youth Officer brings with it the same privacy protection as exists in the ministry from which the information is requested.
 - The Child and Youth Officer is involved in two joint projects using individually identifiable data already collected by government to explore the impact of government services. One, with the Provincial Health Officer, is looking at outcomes for children in care; the other, with HELP, is considering the impacts of child care funding policies. The Child and Youth Officer has experienced obstacles to obtaining requested information for these projects. So far, these obstacles have been overcome, after some delay.

Observations

- No overarching cross-government strategy is currently in place to collect and analyze data that could reliably assist in answering the question, do government-funded services improve outcomes for children and youth?
- One important way to evaluate the effectiveness of government-funded services for children and youth is to do research based on service and outcome data. Other important ways of evaluating services include qualitative analysis of how they are experienced by service recipients and program-based evaluations.
- Research initiatives, both inside and outside government, often work in isolation from each other.
- The proposed research evaluating the child and youth mental health plan will represent, when implemented, a significant government investment in collecting client and service-level data and linking it to outcomes for children and youth. How this work will fit within a broader strategy to evaluate government-funded services for children and youth is unclear.
- Within government, social ministries typically rely on data held within their own ministry and analyze that data more for the purposes of resource management than for outcome measurement.
- Ministries are not consistent in requesting client and outcome-related data from contractors who provide child, youth and family services.
- Despite a wealth of cross-government data that could assist in strategic policy-making, progress in sharing information among the social ministries is very slow. Both the IDES project and the Social Program Integration Team have encountered significant obstacles in achieving their goals of cross-ministry sharing of information. These obstacles to sharing information are usually framed as privacy



concerns, but more often appear to be rooted in a reluctance to give up control over the information.

- PHLO has experienced similar reluctance from some ministries to share data needed in its ground-breaking work.
- While cross-ministry data linkages can be made using various personal identifiers, such as name and birth date, a common unique personal identifier would make linkages across government easier, more accurate and less costly.
- Identifying individual recipients of services is key to linking services to outcomes. It also allows analysis by such categories and groupings as place of residence, ethnic origin, Aboriginal children, children in care, and children with special needs, thereby providing a wealth of information through which to make comparisons, identify disparities and explore targeting strategies.
- While linking data about services to outcomes will not in itself produce definitive conclusions about the causal connection between the two, it has the potential to provide much better information about the relationship between services and outcomes than is currently available, and can assist in identifying deficiencies and gaps in data, and issues to be explored further.
- Considerable research expertise exists in British Columbia, in academic and research units outside government. This expertise, together with the untapped research capacity within government, could significantly increase government's ability to explore, on the basis of available data, the causal relationship between government-funded services and improved outcomes for children and youth.

Advice to the provincial government

- Implement a cross-government information strategy (tied to a cross-government plan for children and youth) to explore the relationship between government-funded services and subsequent health and socio-economic outcomes for children and youth, based on British Columbia data.
- In developing the strategy:
 - consider adopting outcome indicators used nationally or in other jurisdictions to allow for comparisons
 - consult with those already engaged in outcomes research in order to coordinate with their efforts
 - build on the research work already being done within government and coordinate it, and
 - expand the research capacity of government by increasing partnerships with the British Columbia research community outside government.
- Make use of the independence of the Child and Youth Officer and her statutory right to information from government bodies as a potential way to access, hold and



analyze, in partnership with others, service and outcomes data across social ministries.

- Provide clear and continuing direction from the Premier's office requiring that, in a timely fashion, data be given to the Child and Youth Officer on request and shared, when appropriate, between ministries and with PHLO and other research units outside government.
- Work in partnership with researchers outside government to make plausible findings about the effectiveness of government-funded services in improving outcomes for children and youth.
- Recognize the potential role for the Child and Youth Officer, as an independent observer of government services, in facilitating the partnership between government and researchers outside of government.

For more information about the Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia, please go to our website at www.gov.bc.ca/cyo.