Children's
COMMISSIONER

Defining child vulnerability: Definitions, frameworks and groups

Technical Paper 2 in Children's Commissioner project on vulnerable children

Cordis Bright

JULY 2017

Contents

Introduction

The Children's Commissioner's Office commissioned Alma Economics, Coram International, Aldaba and Cordis Bright to undertake some groundwork and a feasibility assessment for a report on vulnerable and invisible children. The work took place between February and May 2017 and was intended to estimate and rapidly review existing evidence on:

> the number of vulnerable children (Alma Economics)

> outcomes for vulnerable children (Cordis Bright)

> the subjective wellbeing of vulnerable children (Coram)

> the health of vulnerable children (Aldaba)

Before launching the four workstreams it was necessary to identify a common and agreed working definition of "vulnerable children", as well as identification of groups of vulnerable children on which to base this exploratory research. This document presents the approach taken by the Children's Commissioner's Office and the four research teams in starting this ambitious project to understand more about the nation's vulnerable children.

Definition of vulnerability

At this start of this project the Children's Commissioner's Office identified seven broad categories of vulnerable children to provide an initial framework of what is meant by 'vulnerable'. The categories were neither an exhaustive list nor mutually exclusive but were intended as a starting point to stimulate further thinking. The seven types of vulnerability identified also tend to reflect distinct sources of data and so are useful in making the connection from conceptual groups to measurement. The seven starting categories were:

1. **Formal categories of children in care of the state** whether in care, or living in other forms of state provision such as offender institutions, residential special schools, mental health establishments or other forms of hospital

2. **Formal categories of need that may reflect family circumstances** such as children receiving Free School Meals or Children in Need, and asylum seeking children

3. **Categories of need that reflect features of child development** such as children in Pupil Referral Units or with Special Education Needs and Disability. These groups might also include wider categories such as children subject to assessment or supervision under the Children Act, children subject to court orders or in receipt of youth justice services and missing children

4. **Children who are in receipt of services following assessment** even if they do not have a formal status. For instance, those with a CAHMS service but with no formal diagnosis, those receiving prevention services through children's care, or youth justice, all of whom have been assessed by statutory agencies as vulnerable in some manner

5. **Informal types of vulnerability** that may be important to the practice of local agencies such as for example when a child is referred to CAMHS who does not reach the threshold required to access services but where unmet need and vulnerability may still exist, or a child identified as part of a family experiencing domestic violence and abuse

6. **Definitions relating to national policy such as 'troubled families' or 'just about managing' families**. This category will often relate closely to other categories and where children are identified as in need of support through such mechanisms they are in scope of this review

7. **Scientific and academic literature** on risk and resilience such as Sameroff (2005), Rutter (2012), and including tools and approaches such as the measurement of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

This definition and categorisation of vulnerability informed the subsequent process of identification of existing frameworks and the groups of children commonly referred to as vulnerable that were the focus for this exploratory research.

Approach to defining child vulnerability

The approach used by the Cordis Bright team to define child vulnerability is summarised in Figure 1**Error! Reference source not found.** and is explained in greater detail below. This process took place over a two-week period in February 2017. It was designed to:

> Distil information from a wide range of sources and sectors in a short timescale.

> Promote discussion about approaches and challenges to defining vulnerability.

> Develop an agreed list of vulnerable groups to form the basis of the subsequent review of the prevalence, outcomes, subjective wellbeing and health of vulnerable children

As such, it is a starting point for further work to define and understand vulnerability and is open to ongoing challenge and refinement.

Figure 1 Approach to defining child vulnerability

> Project launch meeting

> Step 1: Rapid review of *frameworks* and *groups.*

> Step 2: Facilitation of an internal Cordis Bright "sense-testing" meeting.

> Step 3: Circulation of outputs to Children's Commissioner's Office and wider research team (Alma Economics, Coram International and Aldaba). Finalisation of 32 vulnerable groups through an iterative workshop process with research teams and Children's Commissioner's Office. In addition to this six further sub-groups were identified for Coram's qualitative work on subjective wellbeing.

Step 1. Rapid review of frameworks and groups. This review focussed on commonly used frameworks for working with vulnerable children and young people across children's services, social care, health and criminal justice. It also included a review of groups of vulnerable children that are commonly referred to in the literature. The rapid review formed the basis of discussion in Steps 2 and 3 below. The search terms and methodology for the rapid reviews are outlined in the Appendix.

Step 2. Internal "sense-testing" meeting with the wider Cordis Bright team. The review in Step 1 was discussed and "sense-tested" with Senior Consultants, Consultants and Researchers from the wider Cordis Bright team (see: http://www.cordisbright.co.uk) with specialisms in both research and practice concerning supporting vulnerable children and young people. Following this discussion the review was refined.

Steps 3. Children's Commissioner's Office workshop. The rapid review of frameworks and groups was then presented at a workshop facilitated by the Children's Commissioner's Office, along with initial findings and approaches from the other research teams. Findings from the review were then

refined down to a list of 32 groups of vulnerable children through an iterative process that incorporated feedback from the other teams and senior Children's Commissioner's Office leaders and in comparison with the Children's Commissioner's Office's seven categories of vulnerable children. The list was then finalised by the Children's Commissioner's Office and agreed with the research teams as a common list to be used by three of the research teams looking at numbers, outcomes and health outcomes of vulnerable children. This list of groups is presented in Figure 3.

In addition, it was agreed that Coram would explore the qualitative wellbeing of children from the following additional groups:

> Children in detention

> Children affected by immigration control

> Children involved in gangs

> Children excluded from schools

> Children with mental health needs.

Frameworks of vulnerability

Frameworks of vulnerability are ways of thinking that combine different elements or groups of vulnerable children into a single structure across broad groups of concern.

The frameworks identified as relevant in the rapid review are outlined in Figure 2. These frameworks are used for working with vulnerable children and young people across different sectors including children's services, social care, health and criminal justice. Some of the frameworks have official or statutory status. Others have been developed by frontline agencies or academic bodies.

The frameworks serve a range of purposes:

> **Standards.** These frameworks conceptualise the level or quality of service provision expected, or offer best practice guidance to professionals.

> **Description.** These frameworks describe services or interventions according to the level of need they meet or target.

> **Tools.** These frameworks are used to measure and assess levels of vulnerability, identify levels of support required and / or assess the quality of service provision.

The frameworks also conceptualise and measure child vulnerability at different levels:

> **Individual**. These frameworks help understand the vulnerability and needs of the individual child or young person and their family.

> **Service.** These frameworks apply to specific interventions, organisations or services.

> **Geography.** These frameworks apply to aggregate levels of child vulnerability, for example across local authorities, nation states or other geo-political areas.

Figure 2 Frameworks identified

Framework name	Sector	What is it about?	Level of measurement			What is it?	Official guide / policy?
			Individual	Service	Geograp hy		
Working together to safeguard children (HM Government, 2015)	All agencies involved in safeguarding	Guidance for professionals and agencies on safeguarding children.	-	✓	-	Standards	✓
Four tier model of services[1]	Children's social care	Describes children's services according to the level of need they meet	-	✓	-	Description	✓
The children's safeguarding performance information framework (Department for Education, 2015)	Children's social care	List of nationally collected data that can be used to measure health of child protection system at local and national level.	-	-	✓	Tool	✓
Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, 2000)	Children's social care; health	Assessment framework for identifying children's welfare and needs. Includes: family and environment, child development and parental capacity.	✓		-	Tool	✓

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[1] Description taken from Social Care Institute for Excellence (2015). Introduction to children's social care [online].

Framework name	Sector	What is it about?	Level of measurement			What is it?	Official guide / policy?
			Indivi - dual	Service	Geography		
Children's Continuum of Need and Response Framework (Blackburn with Darwen LSCB, 2014)	Children's social care	Example of a local assessment for identifying level of help and protection required for children to get best outcomes. To be used by all professional working with children, young people and their families.	✓	-	-	Tool	✓ (local)
An equal start: Improving outcomes in Children's Centres (Institute of Health Equity, 2012)	Children's social care; education	Identifies the most important outcomes for children's centres to strive for.	-	✓	✓	Standards / tool	-
Single Assessment Framework[2]	Children's social care; criminal justice; education, health	Tool to assess needs and identify early support according to 5 priority outcomes. For use by all professionals. (Local framework replacing CAF and Children in Need).	✓	-	-	Tool	✓

[2] Local example taken from Bristol City Council (2014). Guidance to completing the Single Assessment Framework.

Framework name	Sector	What is it about?	Level of measurement			What is it?	Official guide / policy?
			Indivi - dual	Service	Geograp hy		
[Common Assessment Framework (Department for Education, 2004)](#)	Children's social care; criminal justice; education; health	Tool to assess needs and identify early support according to 5 priority outcomes. For use by all professionals.	✓	-	-	Tool	✓
[Framework of outcomes for young people (The Young Foundation, 2012)](#)	Children's social care, health, education	Outcomes-based framework for frontline staff and services to measure impact and improve services for young people.	-	✓	-	Standards / tool	-
[Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (Department for Education, 2014)](#)	Education	Standards for all early years providers. Includes safeguarding and welfare as well as learning and development provision in: communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development.	-	✓	-	Standards	✓
[Section 251 statements](#)[3]	Children's social care; education	Statement of expenditure by local authority.	-	-	✓	Statement of expend- iture	✓

[3] Description and exemplar guidance taken from Education Funding Agency (2013). Section 251 [online].

Framework name	Sector	What is it about?	Level of measurement			What is it?	Official guide / policy?
			Indivi - dual	Service	Geography		
[National Framework for Children and Young People's Continuing Care (Department of Health, 2016)](#)	Health	Tool for Clinical Commissioning Groups. Used in complex health needs assessment.	✓	-	-	Tool	✓
[Children's Health Outcomes: The findings from the CHUMS Research (Council for Disabled Children and Health, no date)](#)	Health	Research report identifying important outcomes to be measured for children and young people with neuro-disability. Research funded by National Institute of Health Research.	✓	✓	-	Tool	-
[National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (Department of Health, 2004)](#)	Children's social care; health; mental health	Service provision standards to promote health and wellbeing of children. In particular see Standard 9 on provision of CAMHS: *The Mental Health and Psychological Well-being of Children and Young People*.	-	✓	-	Standards	✓
[Primary, secondary and tertiary prevention[4]](#)	Health; public health	Describes intervention according to stage of illness/injury/issue that it addressed. Used in USA / Canada.	-	✓	-	Description	-

[4] Description taken from Institute for Work and Health (2015). What researchers mean by... primary, secondary and tertiary prevention [online].

Framework name	Sector	What is it about?	Level of measurement			What is it?	Official guide / policy?
			Indivi - dual	Service	Geography		
Public Health and NHS Outcomes Framework for Children (Public Health England, 2017)	Health; public health	Benchmarking tool for progress / performance on a range of children's health and wellbeing indicators. Developed by Public Health England's National Child and Maternal Health Intelligence Network.	-	-	✓	Tool	-
Selective, indicative and universal prevention[5]	Mental health; public health	Describes public health prevention strategies according to target group. Used in the USA.	-	✓	-	Description	-
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Adopted1989)[6]	Wide-ranging	UN statement on children's rights. Can be used to benchmark whether needs and rights are being met appropriately.	✓	✓	✓	Standards	✓
Equality and Human Rights Commission Children's measurement framework (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016)	Wide-ranging	Tool for measuring progress in equality and human rights for children across a range of areas.	-	-	✓	Tool	-

[5] Description taken from Community Health Initiatives (2017). Prevention [online].
[6] Description taken from UNICEF UK (no date). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Framework name	Sector	What is it about?	Level of measurement			What is it?	Official guide / policy?
			Indivi - dual	Service	Geography		
[Youth Justice: the Scaled Approach (Youth Justice Board, no date)](#)	Criminal justice	Tool used by YOT to determine level and type of intervention required based on risks and needs, aiming to reduce likelihood of reoffending.	✓	-	-	Tool	✓
[Reducing re-offending: supporting families, creating better future (Department for Children, Schools and Families and Ministry of Justice, 2009)](#)	Criminal justice	Sets out key tasks for organisations and services in improving support for families of offenders and reducing re-offending.	-	✓	✓	Standards	✓

Vulnerable groups

The frameworks in Figure 2 offer different ways to understand the needs of vulnerable children and the support provided to them. However, these frameworks do not provide a clear, consistent or measurable definition of vulnerability across all groups of children who may be considered vulnerable. As such they cannot be used as indicators to measure the number of vulnerable children, nor as a basis for research into the differential outcomes, wellbeing and health of vulnerable children.

Given the breadth of the concept of vulnerability, there is currently no straightforward way to clearly define vulnerable children. Cordis Bright alongside the Children's Commissioner's Office and the three other research teams therefore took the approach outlined in

Figure 1 to identify specific groups of vulnerable children that could form and inform an initial working, measurable framework of vulnerable children. These groups would then underpin the subsequent research into the numbers, outcomes, wellbeing and health of vulnerable children.

The groups were included on the basis of one or more of the following:

> They were referenced within one or more of the frameworks in Figure 2.

> They have recently been the focus of policy or legislation.

> They were absent from the reviewed frameworks, policy and legislation but the previous experience and knowledge of the Children's Commissioner's Office and the research teams involved in the review suggested that children in these circumstances are, or might be, likely to be more vulnerable than children in the general population and that therefore their prevalence, outcomes, subjective wellbeing and health could usefully be explored.

As discussed above, the use of the 32 groups is intended as a starting point for further work to define and understand vulnerability and is open to challenge and refinement.

Mapping the starting definitions of vulnerability to the 32 groups

Figure 3 presents the list of 32 groups of vulnerable children agreed by the Children's Commissioner's Office and the research teams involved in the review. This is not an exhaustive list of children who are vulnerable, and it should also be noted that some children will be members of a number of groups, either concurrently or consecutively over the course of their childhood.

Within Figure 3, the 32 groups are mapped against the Children's Commissioner's Office's seven categories of vulnerable children, i.e:

1. Formal categories of children in care of the state

2. Formal categories of need that may reflect family circumstances

3. Categories of need that reflect features of child development, assessment/supervision under the Children Act, subjects of Court Orders, youth justice services and missing children

4. Children who are in receipt of services following assessment, even without formal status

5. Informal types of vulnerability important to the practice of local agencies, even without assessment / when threshold not met

6. Definitions relating to national policy

7. Groups identified in scientific and academic literature

This illustrates that many of the vulnerable groups defined by the review fall into more than one of the starting categories.

In addition, the groups have been categorised into one of nine domains to describe the type of vulnerability to which they relate. These are:

> 1. Safeguarding concerns or in local authority care

> 2. Health and/or disability

> 3. Economic circumstances

> 4. Family circumstances/characteristics

> 5. Educational engagement

> 6. Involvement in offending and/or anti-social behaviour

> 7. Experience of abuse/exploitation

> 8. Missing and absent children

> 9. Minority populations

In some instances, the groups could sit within more than one domain, but in Figure 3 they are placed in the domain which is considered to be most relevant. Again, this may be open to challenge and further refinement.

Figure 3 Final 32 groups of vulnerable children

Domain and group	Initial seven categories of vulnerability						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Safeguarding concerns or experience of local authority care							
Children looked after/looked after children	✓						
Care leavers			✓			✓	
Children in Need		✓					
Adopted children			✓				
Children who are subject to child protection plans.		✓					
Children in a secure detention estate	✓						
Unaccompanied asylum seeking children	✓						

Domain and group	Initial seven categories of vulnerability						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Children who are subject to a special guardianship order			✓				
2. Health and/or disability							
Children who have special educational needs and/or disability (SEND)			✓				
Children who have mental health difficulties				✓	✓		
Children who have physical health issues				✓	✓		
3. Economic circumstances							
Children who are homeless or who are in insecure/unstable housing		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Children in poverty				✓	✓	✓	
Children in low income families				✓	✓	✓	

Domain and group	Initial seven categories of vulnerability						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Family circumstances/characteristics							
Children in 'troubled families'				✓	✓	✓	
Young carers				✓	✓	✓	
Children whose parents use substances problematically					✓		
Teenage parents				✓	✓	✓	
Children in non-intact families					✓		
Pre Section 17					✓		
Undocumented children and children without legal identity/regular immigration status					✓		✓

Domain and group	Initial seven categories of vulnerability						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Children whose parents may have limited parenting capacity					✓		
5. Educational engagement							
NEET/pre-NEET children				✓	✓	✓	
Excluded pupils, and those at risk of exclusion				✓	✓		
6. Involvement in offending / anti-social behaviour							
Children involved with the criminal justice system/young offenders			✓	✓	✓		
Young people who are involved in gangs			✓	✓	✓	✓	
7. Experience of abuse / exploitation							
Experience of childhood trauma or abuse			✓	✓	✓		

Domain and group	Initial seven categories of vulnerability						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Victims of modern slavery or trafficking				✓	✓		
8. Missing and absence							
Missing children			✓		✓		
Absent children			✓		✓		
9. Minority populations							
Children from minority ethnic backgrounds							✓
Children who are in a gender minority or who are lesbian, gay or bisexual							✓

Discussion and conclusion

As outlined above, this exploratory research required an approach in order to identify vulnerable children. A collaboratively agreed framework and approach was also necessary in order for the findings from the different workstreams to be comparable and correspond to one another.

The methodology outlined in this document has been successful in that it enabled the project team to agree on 32 groups of vulnerable children . These groups then formed the basis for the next phase of research to explore the number, outcomes, health and wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people.

However, there remain some challenges to developing this exploratory research concerning vulnerable children. Five key challenges are outlined below.

Hidden or invisible children

Identifying all children in each group is challenging. Children in some groups are less likely to be well-engaged with services and they are unlikely to be captured in national statistics, monitoring data or other forms of data. For example, it is generally accepted that the number of children referred to the National Referral Mechanism represents an under-estimate of the number of children who have experienced modern slavery due to a combination of the under-identification of potential victims by services, and the under-reporting of those children thought to be victims[7]. Therefore, there are likely to be children who are vulnerable because they are not recognised as a member of one or more vulnerable groups. This makes prevalence estimates and measurements of outcomes for this groups challenging and acts as a barrier to an effective response to vulnerability.

Double counting

The groups are not mutually exclusive. This poses a challenge in the estimation of total numbers of vulnerable children. A child-level dataset including indicators for all 32 groups would be necessary in order to avoid double counting and accurately gauge the total number of vulnerable children under this definition. However, this exploratory research has enabled estimates of the numbers of vulnerable children to be produced.

Separation of impacts

As noted above, many children will fall into several vulnerability groups. It is therefore likely that there will be several vulnerability factors (e.g. risk and protective factors) influencing a child's outcomes. In order to estimate the impact of a particular factor on outcomes, it is necessary to control for the impact of other relevant variables. This can be achieved through multi-variate modelling but requires both sophisticated research designs and data-sets. This research can provide a focus as to where gaps in knowledge exist concerning vulnerability and should help shape future areas of research.

Belonging to a vulnerable group does not necessarily mean you are vulnerable

The groups outlined in this report identify groups of children that are at risk of poorer outcomes. However, being a member of a vulnerable group does not mean you will necessarily have poorer outcomes. As knowledge develops more is understood about the role of protective factors and other

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[7] See, for example, Bales, K., Hesketh, O., & Silverman, B. (2015). *Modern slavery in the UK: How many victims?* Significance, 12(3), 16-21

mechanisms that support children who may be from vulnerable groups to achieve outcomes similar or better than counterparts from groups that may not be considered vulnerable.

In addition, some of the identified vulnerable groups might be better understood as risk factors for vulnerability, rather than indicators of vulnerability in and of themselves. For example, children from minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be unemployed as adults than the general population[8]. However, children from minority ethnic backgrounds are also more likely to live in persistent poverty, which in turn leads to worse outcomes[9]. The impact of ethnicity on employment is therefore likely to be indirect, via its relationship to poverty (and other factors), rather than because minority ethnic groups are inherently more vulnerable.

Risk of stigmatisation

In using these groups to define and explore vulnerability, there is a risk that children who are members of these groups become associated with vulnerability and with anticipated poorer outcomes that might be linked to being a member of these groups. This could lead to children being categorised as vulnerable, and potentially treated differently as a result, when in fact protective factors including resilience means that they are no more vulnerable than a child in the general population.

Despite the above challenges, the exploratory research provides a valuable framework to further develop knowledge and understanding of vulnerability which should ultimately lead to improved responses from policy and practice to improve outcomes for children.

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[8] Department for Work and Pensions (2016) Labour market status by ethnic group. London: Department for Work and Pensions. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/labour-market-status-by-ethnic-group-annual-data-to-2015 [Accessed 20 April 2017]
[9] Fisher, P. and Nandi, A. (2015) Poverty across ethnic groups through recession and austerity. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-across-ethnic-groups-through-recession-and-austerity

Appendix: Rapid review search terms and methodology

Frameworks

We searched for potentially-relevant frameworks using the following search terms. Searches were conducted in Google and Google Scholar.

Primary search terms were searched in combination with the secondary search term and each tertiary search term (e.g. "framework + children + social care", "framework + children + health")

We looked at the first 50 results for each combined search term and scanned for all potentially relevant, publicly available frameworks and/or articles and reports referencing frameworks. We included any relevant articles and reports in the review.

In total the searches returned 7,200 results which were assessed for relevance.

Figure 4 Frameworks search terms

Primary search terms	Secondary search term	Tertiary search terms
Framework Category Threshold Hierarchy Model Tier	Children	Social care Health Criminal justice Education Housing Mental health NHS Local authority Statutory Vulnerable Need Support

Groups

We searched for potentially-relevant groups using the following search terms. Searches were conducted in Google and Google Scholar

The primary search term was searched combination with each secondary search term and each tertiary search term (e.g. "child + vulnerable + group", "child + vulnerable + category")

We looked at the first 50 results for each combined search term and scanned for all potentially relevant groups and definitions. All identified groups were included in the review and the most relevant reports/articles about these groups were included in the review.

In total the searches returned 2,000 results which were assessed for relevance.

Figure 5 Groups search terms

Primary search terms	Secondary search term	Tertiary search terms
Child	Vulnerable At risk Need Hidden Invisible	Group Category Characteristic Risk factor