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Linking two administrative datasets about looked after children: testing feasibility and enhancing understanding

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Background with rationale

Every year all 32 local authorities in Scotland provide information on looked after children in their area to the Scottish Government. This forms the basis for the annual Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS). Information is also collected by Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) on all children who are involved in the Children's Hearings System. Until now these two data sets had never been linked.

Main aim

To test the feasibility and success of the linkage on the basis that these datasets had not previously been linked, and if linkage was possible, use this data to enhance our understanding of the child and process factors associated with pathways to permanence or lack of permanence.

Methods/Approach

The CLAS and SCRA data were linked by a trusted third party (National Records Scotland) using a child's date of birth, gender and the local authority at the time they became looked after within a predefined period of time (2012-13). The data were analysed within the National Safe Haven in Edinburgh.

Results

For the first time, as part of the Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland study, these two data sets were linked safely and successfully for 1,000 children who became looked after in 2012-13 when they were aged five and under.

The linkage provided important new information for practitioners and policymakers. In this presentation we will focus on the key findings, such as what it told us about previous referrals and methodological insights regarding these data sets and their linkage.

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Conclusion

The data linkage process was complex and time-consuming but possible. The data we were able to link provided valuable information that enhanced our understanding of child and process factors.