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School Suspensions: How linking education and children's social care data to address gaps in data collection can reveal previously hidden trends.

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Objectives

Data on school suspensions and exclusions is no longer collected specifically for children receiving care and support in Wales prompting concern that evidence gaps are hiding problems and preventing solutions from being developed. This study set out to explore this could be addressed using linked education and social care data.

Methods

Unlike in England where information about children receiving and support from their local authority including those who are looked after or on the child protection register, these are separate datasets in Wales which can be linked in SAIL Databank.

Four years' worth of data was linked for children aged 5 to 15 educated in maintained schools and/or in other settings. Binary logistical regression was then performed to investigate the relationship between receiving care and support either currently or previously, and being suspended from school during the academic year. Pupil characteristics, type of setting(s) attending and SEN provision were controlled for.

Results

Despite less than 3% of Welsh pupils receiving care and support from their local authority, they are five times more likely than their peers to have one or more fixed-term exclusion (OR: 5.11, 95% CI: 4.92 to 5.29). Those on the Child Protection Register (CPR) are almost 8 times more likely to have been excluded than those who have never been on either a Child in Need (pre-2016) or receiving care and support (OR: 7.95, 95% CI: 7.31 to 8.65). This elevated likelihood of being suspended remains significant after controlling for age, gender, special educational needs, free school meal eligibility, ethnicity, fluency in Welsh and settings. Year-on-year comparisons additionally reveal that an upward trend in the rates of suspension amongst those on the CPR.

Conclusions

This novel, population-wide evidence adds weight to the calls for data to be systematically collected around school exclusions for this vulnerable group and/or refining the methodology for linking the education and children's social care data so that fixed-term exclusions can be more readily monitored.

