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Harnessing Administrative Data for Poverty Research in Northern Ireland: A Purposive Mapping Exercise to Showcase Potential and Encourage Data Sharing

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Abstract

Introduction
Administrative data offers significant opportunities to strengthen the evidence base for poverty research and policy. Although a small number of countries are leading the way in making such data available for analysis, progress in Northern Ireland has been constrained by various political, legal, and governance barriers. The Poverty Roundtable Collective was established by the Administrative Data Research Centre Northern Ireland (ADRC-NI) to explore how linked administrative data could better inform poverty-related policy and practice. To support this initiative, we conducted a structured, purposive mapping exercise exploring applications of administrative data in poverty research and synthesised these applications into a concise illustrative framework for understanding the main roles such data can play in strengthening poverty evidence and policy.

Objectives
This exercise addressed two questions: (1) how administrative data have been used to study poverty internationally, and (2) what policy insights have emerged from this research.

Methods
Web of Science and Google Scholar were searched to identify relevant studies, and a purposive selection was made to identify key thematic areas within the literature.

Results
Selected studies demonstrated that administrative data can support poverty research by identifying vulnerable populations, analysing poverty-related outcomes, evaluating policy and programme interventions, improving poverty measurement, and examining poverty dynamics over time and during periods of economic instability. These findings informed an illustrative five-part framework for strengthening poverty evidence and policy. However, while administrative data enable large-scale and longitudinal analyses, the literature remains concentrated in institutional and service-based outcomes, and some populations may remain underrepresented within administrative records.

Conclusions
Overall, this exercise provides preliminary insights into the potential of administrative data in generating the evidence necessary to propel global efforts in understanding, monitoring, and reducing poverty. However, their contribution is shaped by governance constraints and by the institutional contexts in which they are generated. Strengthening access and linkage infrastructure is essential to ensuring that administrative data are used responsibly and effectively to inform anti-poverty policy. Equally important are the mechanisms through which evidence is translated into policy, which require further exploration.

Keywords
poverty, administrative data, policy, narrative review

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Introduction

Poverty remains one of the most pressing health, social, and economic challenges facing societies worldwide [1–3]. In Northern Ireland (NI), a population of approximately 1.93 million [4], nearly one-in-five people are estimated to be living in poverty [5]. Addressing this challenge requires robust and policy-relevant evidence to inform anti-poverty strategies and evaluate their effectiveness [6, 7]. Like most high-income countries, NI routinely collects extensive administrative data across health, education, housing, and social protection systems [8]. When made accessible and appropriately linked, these data offer considerable potential to strengthen the poverty evidence base and inform policy [8]. Containing detailed, individual-level information across large populations, administrative data can help identify groups that have historically been difficult to reach through traditional survey methods [9]. Additionally, when linked with other data sources, administrative data enable more nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena [10, 11], including poverty, which is increasingly recognised as multidimensional [12, 13]. Their longitudinal nature further enables exploration of intergenerational cycles of advantage and disadvantage, the effectiveness of anti-povertypoverty programmes and initiatives, and long-term trends and outcomes associated with particular poverty-relevant exposures [14].

Administrative data infrastructures exist in most countries, but access and linkage for research vary widely. Countries such as Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands are widely regarded as leaders in facilitating research access to linked administrative data [15], while elsewhere, political, legal, ethical, and governance constraints can render access arduous or limited [16–20]. This is despite strict safeguards, including researcher accreditation and training, formal approval processes, and secure data environments [21]. In NI, challenges in accessing poverty-related administrative data have been particularly evident [8]. Given the burden of poverty in NI, the Poverty Roundtable Collective was convened by the Administrative Data Research Centre Northern Ireland (ADRC-NI) – a partnership between Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) – to strengthen the use of linked administrative data to inform poverty-related policy and practice, bringing together government, Voluntary and Community Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector stakeholders, and researchers.

To inform this initiative and showcase the potential of administrative data for understanding poverty, we conducted a structured, purposive mapping exercise addressing two questions: (1) how have administrative data been used to study poverty, and (2) what policy insights have emerged from this body of research? Rather than undertaking a full systematic review, this exercise aimed to provide a structured overview of the ways in which administrative data have been utilised to inform poverty research and to synthesise these applications into a concise framework for understanding the main roles such data can play in strengthening poverty evidence and policy. We adopted a broad conceptualisation of poverty, examining cross-domain patterns in how it is operationalised, measured, and analysed using administrative data, with the aim of clarifying their potential role in strengthening poverty research and policy in NI.

Methods

In line with the objective of this review, searches were restricted to Web of Science and Google Scholar, which together capture a broad cross-disciplinary range of peer-reviewed articles. The search strategy combined poverty-related terms including "poverty", "low-income*", "low socioeconomic*", "disadvantage*" with the term "administrative data" to identify studies explicitly engaging with both administrative data sources and poverty-related constructs. First searches were conducted in January 2024 and then repeated in September 2025 to identify more recent studies. Inclusion criteria included that the study focused on a poverty-related issue and used administrative data. We adopted a broad definition of poverty, encompassing economic (e.g., absolute, and relative poverty, employment status, income, wealth, debt, welfare support) and broader dimensions of poverty (e.g., food insecurity, housing instability). Administrative data was defined in this context as data collected by government services during regular operations. We focused on English-language articles published between 2000 and 2025. The strategy prioritised conceptual specificity – identifying studies that clearly framed their work in terms of administrative data and poverty – rather than maximal sensitivity to all possible administrative data research. The searches identified a large body of potentially relevant articles (∼1340 articles in total), however, in keeping with the narrative focus of this review, a purposive selection of studies was made to illustrate key themes, rather than attempting exhaustive coverage. The aim was to capture a sufficiently broad range of the literature to highlight the ways in which administrative data have been used to study poverty internationally.

Following screening, the included studies were reviewed in full and analysed using an inductive thematic approach. Initial notes were taken on the primary research focus, poverty construct, and role of administrative data within each study. Through iterative comparison across studies, recurring focal areas were identified and grouped into seven initial descriptive categories: (1) specific vulnerable groups, (2) outcomes associated with poverty, (3) policy or programme implementation and evaluation, (4) measurement of poverty, (5) poverty dynamics, (6) child development, and (7) economic instability (see Supplemental Table 1 for characteristics of included studies). These descriptive categories were subsequently compared for conceptual similarity, overlap and the broader role played by administrative data in each area. During this process, child development was incorporated within "outcomes associated with poverty", as studies in this category primarily used administrative data to examine developmental outcomes associated with socioeconomic disadvantage rather than representing a distinct function of administrative data. Similarly, poverty dynamics and economic instability were combined because both concerned changes in socioeconomic circumstances over time, including movements into, out of, or within states of economic disadvantage. This consolidation resulted in five

broader, conceptually distinct themes. The similarities and differences across these five themes were then examined to derive a five-part framework describing the principal roles of administrative data in poverty research. Studies could contribute to more than one theme where their objectives or applications overlapped; for example, research concerning specific vulnerable groups could also examine particular poverty-related outcomes. Rather than requiring themes to be mutually exclusive, the framework was intended to capture distinct but potentially intersecting roles of administrative data. The resulting framework and allocation of studies across themes were reviewed by a second reviewer, with there being no areas of disagreement. Among the included studies, policy implications were recorded only where authors made explicit recommendations relating to policy development or implementation. The discussion sections of all included studies were examined for such recommendations.

Results

Theme 1: Identifying vulnerable populations

Administrative data has been particularly useful in identifying population groups at heightened risk of poverty and its long-term consequences. These include immigrants, racial minorities, veterans, people with disabilities, young people with experiences of out-of-home care, the homeless, and individuals affected by divorce.

Immigrants

Research using Swedish registry data showed that immigrant families were disproportionately concentrated in the lowest income quintiles, with their children experiencing reduced upward mobility compared to native-born peers [22]. Consequently, authors suggested that policies restricting mobility and neighbourhood access may reinforce intergenerational immobility for immigrant populations [22]. Similarly, evidence from the Netherlands using linked administrative and survey registers (2007 to 2015) indicated that while many first-generation immigrants gradually converge towards native patterns of welfare use, certain subgroups, including family migrants, asylum migrants, and those with lower educational attainment, remained entrenched in long-term welfare dependency [23]. Thus, authors highlighted the importance of integration policies aimed at reducing social and economic exclusion for these individuals [23]. However, not all studies identify immigrants as being the most disadvantaged group, with findings from cross-sectional research using linked health, cCensus and immigration records in Canada demonstrating that differences in cardiovascular risk across income quintiles were less pronounced among immigrants than long-term residents, even after accounting for neighbourhood-level proportions of racialised and minority populations [24]. Therefore, authors suggested that public health policies should also focus on disadvantaged long-term residents, who may be at equal or greater risk for certain health problems [24].

Racial minorities

Evidence from a cross-sectional study in the US using linked census and administrative data on prison admissions demonstrated how Black and African American children with family incomes below the poverty line experienced more neighbourhood prison admissions than the average poor white child [25]. Similarly, research using linked survey and education records (2009–2015) demonstrated how Black youth attending segregated and highly disadvantaged schools experienced accelerated epigenetic ageing [26]. Authors highlighted that such insights may be useful in informing policy interventions aimed at reducing health inequalities for these young people [26].

Veterans

Cross-sectional research conducted using US Veteran's Health Administration (VHA) data found that food insecurity was more likely among vVeterans who were low-income and experiencing housing instability [27]. Also, a study using cross-sectional VHA data [28] showed that LGBQ+ veterans had a more than two-fold risk of food insecurity and were more likely to have other factors which increased their vulnerability to food insecurity such as low- income and homelessness/housing instability. Based on these findings, authors highlighted the importance of policies focused on food insecurity among veterans, including LGBQ+ veterans [28].

People with disabilities

Research using merged hospital and census records in Denmark (1952–2013) showed how children hospitalisedzed during the 1952 polio epidemic were more likely to experience early retirement and dependence on disability benefit in later life [29]. Similar patterns emerged in Canada using health administrative data (2002–2013), where women with intellectual and developmental disabilities who gave birth were more likely to live in rural areas or neighbourhoods within the two lowest income quintiles, rely on social assistance, and experience multiple health and social disadvantages [30].

Children with experiences of out-of-home care

Using linked data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) and social care records in the UK, research showed how children with experiences of out- of-home care faced poorer educational outcomes [31]. Moreover, using statewide administrative datasets in the US (1992–1998), it was shown how disadvantages for this group tend to persist into young adulthood [32]. Specifically, nearly one-fifth of former foster youth were found to receive cash assistance in at least one of the first eight- quarters after discharge, almost one-third relied on food stamps, and incomes for most remained below the poverty threshold up to eight years later. These findings highlight the long-term economic vulnerability of this group and the need for child welfare policies to better support transitions to self-sufficiency [32]. Importantly, aspects of the out-of-home care experience itself shape later poverty-related outcomes. Specifically, using statewide administrative data in the US (2014–2019), it found that a higher number of placements predicted greater use of food stamps at age

23 among those entering foster care during early adolescence, whereas longer cumulative time in care functioned as a protective factor for later employment [33]. Authors suggested that, to promote more positive economic outcomes for this group, policies should be developed which focus on reducing unnecessary placement changes [33].

The homeless

Evidence from education records (2008/2009–2016/2017) in the US provides insights into the characteristics of homeless students, demonstrating how these students are more likely to live in highly impoverished neighbourhoods, have lower median incomes [34], and experience poorer educational outcomes [35]. These findings underscore the need for school districts to develop and mandate consistent protocols for identifying homelessness, ensuring that all students in need are accurately recogniszed and supported [35]. Research also explores the health implications of homelessness among adults, with evidence derived from cross-sectional health administrative data in Canada showing that dementia prevalence is almost 35% higher per 1,000 population among the homeless compared to the general population [36]. Based on these findings, authors emphasise the need for further policy development in supportive housing arrangements for homeless adults [36].

Individuals affected by divorce

Research using longitudinal insurance administrative data in Israel demonstrated how parental divorce increased the likelihood of adolescent employment and adolescents contributing more to household income than children of married parents [37]. Despite not suggesting these young people are at greater risk of poverty, authors note that their higher employment rate may have negative impacts on later educational and employment outcomes. Thus, policies aimed at increasing welfare supports for divorced families may reduce the necessity for adolescents to engage in employment, potentially preventing poorer long-term socioeconomic impacts for these young people [37].

Summary

Across these studies, administrative data are primarily used to identify structurally vulnerable subpopulations and trace long-term economic or health consequences of disadvantage. Poverty is typically operationalised using income quintiles, welfare receipt, or area-level deprivation measures, and frequently intersects with race, migration status, disability, or care history. Notably, many studies rely on longitudinal administrative linkages, allowing researchers to observe persistence of disadvantage over time—an approach that would be difficult using survey data alone.

Theme 2: Analysing poverty-related outcomes

A major focus of the existing literature relates to the outcomes associated with poverty, including both health and non-health related outcomes.

Health

Child health Using data from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Programme for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC; 2010–2014) in the US, researchers found that children living in households with lower parental income and educational attainment, and in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, experienced higher obesity rates [38]. Similarly, neighbourhood material deprivation was linked to incident asthma and asthma-related healthcare visits using linked health and cCensus data (1997–2012) in Canada [39]. Finally, by linking census and health data (2006–2011) in Hungary, it was found that poor housing quality was associated with poorer health at birth and a higher number of days spent in inpatient care during infancy [40]. Based on these findings, authors emphasised the need for policies aimed at improving housing conditions [40].

Adult health Using health insurance data (2011–2013) in Belgium, research showed that unemployment, inability to work over a shorter or longer period with substitute income and living on social welfare contributed to risk of hospitaliszation due to a suicide attempt [41]. Authors suggested that policies focused on improving these economic factors may therefore reduce number of suicide attempts [41]. Income, which was used as a proxy for socioeconomic status, also played an integral role in predicting survival rates, receipt of cardiovascular treatment, length of hospital stay, and rates of readmission in research using hospital admissions data (2013–2018) from Canada, the Netherlands, England, Israel, and Taiwan [42]. Beyond individual-level indicators like income or employment, research in the US, using hospital administrative data (2018–2023), showed that living in areas where 5% or more families were living below the poverty line was associated with severe maternal morbidity, preterm birth, and low birth weight, while residence in areas where 8% or more families were living below the poverty line was associated with neonatal intensive care unit admission [43].

Health behaviours Linked survey and administrative housing data (2006–2012) in the US, indicated that adults receiving housing assistance faced increased risks from smoking and second-hand smoke [44]. These findings highlighted the importance of policies that address tobacco prevention and promote changes in smoking behaviours within this subpopulation [44]. In Canada, analysis of linked cancer registry (2010–2020) and COVID-19 vaccine data (2020–2022) revealed that cancer patients residing in areas characterised by high ethnic concentration, socioeconomic disadvantage, residential instability, or material deprivation were less likely to be vaccinated [45]. More recently, area-level determinants research, using hospital admissions data, has shown that both material and social deprivation were linked to higher rates of self-harm hospitalisations (2015 to 2022) [46].

Medication usage Using linked Census and prescribing data (2011 to 2015) in NI, it was found that living in more deprived areas, residing in social rented housing, and being unemployed were associated with increased anti-depressant

medication prescribing [47]. Similarly, using cross-sectional health administrative data in the Republic of Ireland, it found that polypharmacy was significantly more common among older adults living in deprived areas compared to more affluent areas [48].

Cancer screening Evidence from Canada, using linked immigration, Census, hospital admissions, and cancer registry data (2014–2017), demonstrated that immigrant females living in the lowest income neighbourhoods were more likely to be past due for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer screening [49]. Another study in Canada, using linked healthcare and Census data (2000–2002 inclusive), showed how visible minority status, low- income, and lower educational attainment were associated with inadequate cervical cancer screening in recent female immigrants [50].

Other outcomes

Child development In New South Wales, using linked cross-sectional early childhood developmental census data, early childhood records, and perinatal data, it was found that delayed school entry was less common in socioeconomically-economically disadvantaged areas in Australia [51]. This led authors to suggest policy changes in the mandatory school start age to prevent inequities in developmental abilities in the classroom resulting from variations in date of births. Similarly, linking birth records, hospital and home births and maternity records (2009–2018) in Scotland, economically inactive mothers or those living in the most deprived areas were found to be more likely to smoke tobacco during pregnancy, have prescriptions dispensed for depression and anxiety, and were less likely to breastfeed by 6 to 8 weeks, while their children were more likely to experience obesity at 27 to 30 months and 4 to 5 years, and to be hospitaliszed for unintentional injury [52].

Child maltreatment In the US, using linked survey and administrative earnings and benefits data, research showed how income instability significantly increased risk for child maltreatment beyond the influence of income level [53]. Authors highlighted how these findings underscored the need for policies addressing contributors to income instability among these families [53]. Similarly, using administrative data for all children born in New Zealand (2013–2019), it found that providing unconditional cash transfers for mothers during the first year of the child's life led to a one-in-five reduction in non-urgent child protective services referrals and significantly reduced neglect in single mother families [54]. These findings underscored the benefits of such an intervention to prevent incidences of harm towards children [54].

Education Using sibling data from the Scottish Longitudinal Study (1991-2011), Duta et al. [55] found that siblings whose parents experienced long-term unemployment or had routine/ manual occupations were less likely to earn a university degree (7-8%) than those with parents in managerial/professional roles (56%). Additionally, siblings in social housing (6% vs. 38%), which was used as a proxy for economic disadvantage, and siblings whose parents lacked a higher education degree (15% vs. 72%) also had lower educational attainment. Similarly, research in Germany using welfare and employment records (2010–2019) showed that apprenticeship graduates whose parents had a vocational training or university degree faced a lower risk of unemployment upon graduating, whereas long-term receipt of household benefits was associated with a longer duration of initial unemployment [56].

Electoral Behaviours In Norway, using linked socioeconomic and electoral registry data (2013–2021), it was found that living in a neighbour with a substantive income difference discouraged participation in national elections among low-income voters [57].

Crime Using welfare records in the Netherlands (2005–2017), Stam et al. [58] found that individuals in receipt of social welfare were 12% more likely to supplement their income through crime as the welfare month ended. Based on these findings, authors suggested the need for welfare policies that disburse welfare benefits in instalments to avoid over-consumption at the beginning of the welfare month [58]. In Chile, linked education and justice data (2010–2019) revealed that young adults with low educational attainment were more likely to be in groups characterised by either high rates of offending and persistent victimiszation or offending limited to adolescence with low rates of victimiszation [59]. Similarly, research using criminal justice administrative records (2009–2013) in the US found that debt accumulated from monetary sanctions on offenders was strongly associated with rearrest, reconviction, and parole revocation [60]. These findings led authors to highlight the need for policy changes at the legislative and prosecutorial levels, where the fees and costs for offenders are determined , and where structural change is most feasible [60].

Summary

Overall, across both health and non-health domains, administrative data are most frequently used to examine poverty as a predictor of adverse outcomes, including hospitalisation, educational attainment, child development, child protection involvement, welfare dependency, and criminal justice contact. Poverty is operationalised using a combination of individual-level indicators (income, welfare receipt, unemployment, social assistance) and area-level indices. A consistent pattern is the clustering of economic disadvantage with increased service use and poorer outcomes across sectors.

Theme 3: Evaluating policy and programme interventions

Numerous studies have used administrative data to evaluate governmental programs and policies such as those relating to prenatal/family, childcare, housing, and nutrition subsidies.

Prenatal/Family

In Canada, using health records (2003–2011), Enns et al. [61] showed how low-income First Nations women receiving the Healthy Baby Prenatal Benefit (HBPB) experienced a

significant reduction in low birth weight and preterm births, a significant increase in breastfeeding initiation, and reduced risk of having children with developmental vulnerabilities. Moreover, drawing on administrative records on low-income children and/or children with a maltreatment report in the US (1993–2010), Dvaslikshvili et al. [62] showed how children in families with greater income support were less likely to enter care, underscoring the importance of policies that strengthen financial support for low-income families.

Childcare

In the US, using linked survey and administrative data (1993–2010), research found that receipt of childcare subsidies for low-income families supported transitions from unemployment to employment, including full-time employment [62]. Based on these findings, authors emphasiszed the need to expand this programme to ensure more low-income parents of small children secured employment [63].

Housing/Family

In the US, using linked survey and administrative data (1994–2014), research demonstrated that non-white low-income families living in affordable housing managed through federally subsidised local developments were more likely to experience neighbourhood disadvantage compared with similar families using housing choice vouchers, which allow low-income households to rent in the private market [64]. Policy implications of these findings include that traditional housing choice vouchers may be an effective method to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in neighbourhood attainment [64].

Nutritional

Drawing on educational records (2013/2014–2015/2016) in the US, it was found that school attendance increased in the second year of implementation of universal free meals [65]. Similarly, using linked educational, food stamp, and income tax records (2009/2010– 2016/2017), Domina et al. [66] showed that providing non-means-tested free meals to all students in high -poverty schools had a protective effect on school suspension, particularly for low-income families, students already receiving free meals prior to the intervention, and Hispanic students. Beyond free school meals, using WIC administrative data (2019–2023), Anderson and Whaley [67] found that rates of redemption of healthy food vouchers were significantly lower for households comprising caregivers with lower educational attainment, those receiving food stamps, low-income households, smaller household sizes, or households with only one WIC participant.

Health

In Canada, using linked prescription and health data (2017–2021), it was found that the implementation of new policy eliminating drug copayments for low-income patients resulted in increased drug utiliszation and expenditures [68]. Similarly, in the US, using linked survey and administrative data at a single timepoint, authors found that a new policy where full rather than partial discounts were provided on medications resulted in significantly higher rates of medication adherence among older adults [69]. These studies indicate that these new policies are associated with increased medication adherence among vulnerable groups [68, 69]. Finally, research using disability insurance data (2016–2022) in Australia demonstrates that rates of insurance ineligibility were higher for those residing in deprived areas [70]. Thus, to increase successful applications among socioeconomically marginaliszed groups, authors suggested shifting the responsibility for producing financing eligibility evidence from individuals to the government [70].

Agricultural

Agricultural administrative data (2007–2016) in Brazil demonstrated how a program established to increase water access for small and micro-scale farmers living in a region exposed to severe droughts was most beneficial for low-income farmers [71]. These findings demonstrated the positive impact of climate adaptation policy on outcomes for disadvantaged farmers [71].

Summary

Overall, these studies demonstrate the capacity of administrative data to evaluate policy interventions at population scale, particularly among low-income and marginalised groups. Poverty is typically operationalised using income measures, welfare receipt, or programme eligibility proxies such as free school meals status. A recurrent pattern is that income-related supports and cost-reduction policies are associated with improved service engagement and reduced adverse outcomes, highlighting the value of administrative data for informing policy related research and equity impacts.

Theme 4: Improving poverty measurement

Many studies have attempted to identify the best methods of capturing poverty indicators, exploring the unique benefits of administrative data as compared to survey data, and the utility of current measures of detecting poverty.

Methods of capturing poverty indicators

In the UK, using linked survey and educational records (2000/2001– 2015), free school meal eligibility as the best proxy for parental income for children at the bottom of the income distribution [72]. Notably, free school meal eligibility failed to discriminate well across income levels, and thus, it was recommended that government departments supplement this indicator with neighbourhood-level data [72]. Similarly, using linked cross-sectional birth cohort data and educational records in the UK, Taylor [73] demonstrated that one-in-seven children receiving free school meals were in households above the poverty threshold and many children below the threshold were not in receipt of this subsidy. Thus, authors suggested that policies aimed at lowering socioeconomic disparities should refrain from using free school meals as a sole indicator of poverty [73]. Beyond free school meals, other studies have developed measures to quantify levels of poverty. Using linked survey and administrative data (2008–2013) in the US, Lewis et al. [74] developed a poverty

score comprising age, dual status, receipt of a Part D low-income subsidy, gender, race, residing in a high poverty zip code, and zip code median income. This score was found to better identify impoverished individuals than other frequently adopted indicators [74]. Similarly, using VHA data (2022–2023) in the US, Cornell et al. [75] developed a social risk index comprising indicators across key domains: financial hardship, social support, housing, food insecurity, violence, access to care, legal issues, and area-level deprivation. Food insecurity, legal need, and area-level deprivation were the strongest predictors of hospital readmission among participants, while financial need, social isolation, nonspecific psychosocial and housing risks were also linked to readmission. Finally, another study using administrative data (2006–2008) in the US identified nine social complexity factors including homelessness and poverty and observed a dose-response association between these factors and number of emergency department visits for children. Consequently, authors proposed that social complexity scoring using administrative data could enable more precise targeting of socially vulnerable families [76].

Benefits of administrative data over survey data

Using linked survey and administrative data (2008–2011), Meyer and Mittag [77] showed how after accounting for ownership of significant assets, replacing survey reports of earnings and transfer receipts with administrative records, and accounting for in-kind transfers, more than 90% of people were found to not meet criteria for living in extreme poverty. Similarly, using linked survey and administrative data from a single timepoint in the US, it was found that compared to administrative data, surveys tend to underreport retirement income [78]. Health and deprivation indicator variables derived from administrative data (extracted in 2001, 2006, and 2010) have also been shown to provide similar findings to census indicators, indicating that administrative data can increase availability of reliable and current data outside of census years [79].

The utility of current measures of determining poverty

McCartney et al. [80] examined the ability of area-based deprivation indices to identify income- and employment-deprived individuals in the UK. Findings showed that the sensitivity and specificity for identifying people who lack income and employment were low across all indices evaluated including the 2020 Index of Multiple Deprivation, the Scottish Income and Employment Index, the 2019 English Index of Multiple Deprivation, and the 2019 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Summary

Collectively, this literature demonstrates that administrative data enhance poverty measurement while revealing limitations in widely used proxies. Multidimensional indices are increasingly employed, and comparisons with survey data show systematic income underreporting. However, findings suggest that no single indicator adequately captures the complexity of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Theme 5: Examining poverty dynamics over time and during periods of economic instability

Poverty dynamics, referring to the transitions into and out of poverty, as well as the factors that drive these changes, have also been examined in several studies. Platt [81], for example, used seven quarterly extracts of housing benefit and council tax benefit administrative data between 1998 and 1999 and identified significant poverty dynamics for children whose families receive means-tested assistance in the UK. These findings emphasised the need for policy to consider the impact of poverty and financial instability when evaluating child wellbeing [81]. Similarly, using Norwegian administrative data from 1990 to 2018, it found that children of immigrants often remain in neighbourhood resembling those of childhood, which were characteriszed by economic disadvantage and few ethnic majority residents [82]. Moreover, drawing on census (2001 & 2011) housing valuation data (2005) in NI, Moriarty et al. [83] reported no clear evidence that young people's mental or physical health was impacted by changing address to a higher value or lower value property. However, they did observe an association between poor health in working-age adults and downward moves into lower -value homes. Authors suggested that social protection policies aimed at providing mortgage relief or improving the quality and availability of housing stock may be more effective in reducing poor population health than policies focused on upward mobility. Using linked GP registration, prescription, accident and emergency (A&E), and mortality data from 2010 and 2021, another study in NI examined longitudinal trajectories in area-level deprivation at a population-level and their associations with all-cause mortality, receipt of psychotropic medication, and presentation at A&E departments [84]. Findings identified seven trajectories: stable high deprivation, moderate downward mobility, substantial downward mobility, stable medium deprivation, substantial upward mobility, moderate upward mobility, and stable low deprivation. Compared to stable high deprivation, all other social mobility trajectories had better health outcomes between 2017 and 2021. Authors suggest that these findings could inform the development of targeted policies aimed at improving public health and addressing health inequalities [84].

Administrative data have also enabled poverty dynamics to be examined during periods of wider economic instability, when external shocks may alter individuals' socioeconomic circumstances or intensify existing disadvantage. Using linked survey and administrative data (2017–2021), Fowle and Fyall [85] found that low-income tenants reported significantly more types of informal evictions and eviction tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, authors suggested that policies focused on deterring both formal and informal evictions through increasing costs for landlords to evict may be necessary [85]. Moreover, using data from the Longitudinal Working Lives Sample which is based on administrative records of the Spanish Social Security Administration (2005/2007 & 2009/ 2011), Nagore Garcia and van Soest [86] showed that those most affected by the Spanish fiscal crisis included individuals living in regions with higher unemployment rates, who were less qualified, worked in manual occupations, or were immigrants. Similarly, using district-level administrative data (2006–2016), it was found those most affected by

homelessness during the affordability shock in the UK were individuals with pre-existing health conditions, single parents, and families with children [87].

Collectively, these studies illustrate the capacity of longitudinal administrative data to examine poverty dynamics across both individual trajectories and periods of wider economic instability. Such data can identify persistence and mobility in socioeconomic circumstances; trace associated health and neighbourhood trajectories and reveal how economic shocks disproportionately affect particular population groups. These patterns would be difficult to capture using cross-sectional or survey sources alone.

Cross-cutting themes

Taken together, the reviewed studies demonstrate five distinct and recurring roles of administrative data within poverty research, reflected across the five thematic areas. First, administrative data were used to identify vulnerable populations and groups at heightened risk of poverty, including immigrants, racial minority groups, veterans, disabled individuals, children with out-of-home care experiences, the homeless, and individuals affected by divorce. Second, administrative data were used to analyse outcomes associated with poverty across domains such as health, education, child protection, child development, employment, and criminal justice. Third, administrative data supported the evaluation of policy or programme interventions, particularly among low-income and marginalised groups. Fourth, administrative data were used to refine the measurement of poverty, including through income, welfare receipt, area-level deprivation, programme eligibility, and multidimensional risk indicators. Finally, administrative data enabled analysis of poverty dynamics, including transitions in and out of poverty, neighbourhood mobility, life-course trajectories, and vulnerabilities during periods of economic instability.

This five-part framework provides an illustrative synthesis of how administrative data has contributed to poverty research , showing that administrative data can help identify who is affected, examine what they are experiencing, assess which interventions affect poverty-related outcomes, improve how poverty is measured, and trace how disadvantage changes over time. At the same time, this illustrative framework also highlights boundaries associated with administrative data for poverty research. Specifically, the literature remains concentrated in institutional and service-based outcomes, reflecting the structures within which administrative data are generated. As a result, populations with limited institutional contact and dimensions of poverty less visible in administrative data may remain underrepresented.

Discussion

This purposive, non-systematic mapping exercise was undertaken to inform members of the NI Poverty Roundtable Collective – including government representatives, VCSE sector representatives, and administrative data researchers – about the role administrative data can play in poverty research. Synthesising international evidence, the review addressed two questions: (1) how administrative data have been used to study poverty internationally, and (2) what policy insights have emerged from this body of work. The main contribution of this exercise is the identification of an illustrative five-part framework for understanding the roles that administrative data can potentially play in this field: identifying vulnerable populations; analysing poverty-related outcomes; evaluating policy and programme interventions; improving poverty measurement; and examining poverty dynamics over time and during periods of economic instability. This illustrative framework moves beyond demonstrating the breadth of administrative data use by clarifying the distinct functions such data can serve in poverty research and policy-relevant evidence generation. For NI, this illustrative framework provides a practical way of considering where linked administrative data could strengthen the poverty evidence base, particularly in relation to population identification, cross-sector outcome analysis, policy evaluation, measurement, and longitudinal monitoring. At the same time, the review highlights important limitations associated with administrative data for poverty research, particularly the concentration of research within institutional and service-based outcomes.

The five-part illustrative framework identified in the present study aligns with established research priorities for poverty reduction and prevention [88]. Specifically, it highlights domains in which administrative data offer particular analytic advantages, especially where population-scale and longitudinal evidence are required. For example, findings demonstrate how administrative data can render high-risk or hard-to-reach groups visible and accessible, including ethnic and racial minorities, young people with out-of-home care experiences, and people experiencing homelessness. While possible to identify such groups in alternative data sources such as self-report surveys, full representation is challenging owing to issues related to sampling, recruitment, consent, data collection, and participant attrition, all of which hinder the development of socially inclusive policies and programmes [89]. Moreover, because administrative data are often longitudinal and linkable across sources, they enable examination of poverty dynamics and longer term developmental and health trajectories. Alternative data sources, such as panel studies or birth cohorts, offer important complementary strengths, but can be costly, resource-intensive, and subject to attrition or selection bias [90, 91]. That said, administrative data are not a comprehensive solution. Individuals who avoid institutional systems, experience housing instability, have undocumented immigrant status, or rely on informal income may remain partially or entirely invisible within administrative records [92]. In addition, administrative datasets typically contain only those variables relevant to the functioning of the system in which they are generated, limiting ability to capture the full social and lived dimensions of poverty [93]. Overall, the diverse applications identified in this review underscore both the utility and the boundaries of administrative data in advancing inclusive and policy-relevant poverty research.

Data have been described as "*a powerful weapon in the fight against poverty*" [94], largely owing to their ability to shape policy development [95]. Our illustrative framework supports the value of administrative data in this context, demonstrating how such data can identify the need for new policies, such as welfare policies focused on improving

the transition to independent adult living for young people with experiences of out-of-home care [32] or policies aimed at reducing food insecurity among LGBQ+ vVeterans [28]. Moreover, these data can be used to determine the efficacy of existing policies, such as drug policies eliminating copayments-payments for low-incomes individuals in Canada [68] or climate adaptation policies for low-income farmers in Brazil [71]. This capacity to generate policy-relevant evidence underscores the practical utility of administrative data [96]. However, the illustrative framework concerns evidence generation rather than implementation, which depends upon broader political, institutional, and resource contexts. Given the well-documented gap between research and policymaking [97], stronger connections between researchers and policymakers, greater alignment of research priorities, and increased research capacity within the public sector may be required to support effective knowledge translation [96].

More broadly, this review highlights several mechanisms through which administrative data can contribute to poverty research and policy development. Across domains ranging from prenatal care and child welfare to housing and nutrition, administrative data have been used to identify high-risk populations and assess the effectiveness of targeted interventions. When accessible and linkable, such data can support more precise allocation of resources, although some vulnerable groups remain partially or entirely invisible within administrative systems. The findings also demonstrate that the effects of poverty span health, education, employment, housing, and justice systems. Because administrative datasets are often linkable across sectors, they provide opportunities to examine these interconnected disadvantages and inform more integrated policy responses [15]. At the same time, administrative data are generated within institutional systems and therefore tend to emphasisze individual-level characteristics, programme participation, and service use. As scholars such as O'Connor [98] have noted, poverty research has shifted over time from structural reform to individual-level behaviours. Consequently, structural drivers of poverty, including labour market dynamics, welfare regime design, housing markets, and systematic discrimination, may be less directly visible within administrative records. Recognising this limitation is important for situating administrative data within the wider landscape of poverty scholarship.

Findings from this review should be considered in light of several limitations. First, given that this exercise was designed to provide a cursory overview of the extant evidence base, we acknowledge that it does not capture the full breadth of research on poverty. The search terms and number of search engines deployed were rather limited in scope, and therefore, there are likely other applications of administrative data and examples relevant to this framework that we have not captured. Therefore, the framework presented here should be interpreted as an illustrative synthesis of recurring roles identified across the selected literature, rather than as an exhaustive or globally representative account of all ways in which administrative data are used in poverty research. Second, despite the growing recognition that poverty is a multidimensional construct [12, 13, e.g.,], the majority of the reviewed studies focused on socioeconomic indicators of poverty. While this may reflect our search strategy or potential limitations of administrative data in examining multidimensional poverty, this was a matter we were unable to explore in the present review. Third, studies based in the US and Canada were overrepresented in this review. This may reflect the non-systematic nature of the review, which may have influenced the balance of countries represented, or may simply indicate that poverty-relevant research using administrative data is more prevalent in these contexts. Future research would benefit from greater international comparability, as administrative systems differ widely across countries. There is also a need for more research in low- and middle-income countries, where poverty is most prevalent, but administrative data infrastructures are less developed [94]. Fourth, our conceptualisation of policy implications was rather limited, focusing only on those studies that explicitly mentioned "policy". While individual studies may include recommendations on the basis of their findings not framed within the policy context, this fell beyond the scope of the present review.

This review provides an illustrative five-part framework through which administrative data can be used to generate poverty evidence with policy relevance. This includes identifying vulnerable populations; analysing poverty-related outcomes; evaluating policy and programme interventions; improving poverty measurement; and examining poverty dynamics over time and during periods of economic instability wWhile this framework is in no way exhaustive, and administrative data are not comprehensive and should be complemented by other methodological approaches, it provides a basis from which to understand the potential roles of administrative data for population-level and policy-relevant poverty research. are Continued attention to data governance, linkage infrastructure, and ethical oversight will be necessary to ensure that administrative data continue to be used responsibly and inclusively in efforts to understand and address poverty (AI, Ethics, Data Access, CoI).

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethics statement

This study did not involve any primary data collection and hence did not require ethical approval. All data is extracted from publicly available studies.

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Data availability statement

This review did not include any primary data collection. All data produced in the present study are available upon reasonable request to the authors.

AI statement

The authors declare that no generative AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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