

Health policy reform instigated by research - implications from the CARE assessment model evaluation

Einar Heiervang, Monica Haune and Anne Aabyholm-Brodal

Introduction

Multiple health and care needs have been reported for children in out-of-home care (OOHC) for several decades. Since 2016 the Research Council of Norway has funded an evaluation of a model for how this may be achieved, leading to a new assessment service being implemented nationally, and an amendment to the Child Welfare Act from the year 2023.

Methods

Close to 200 children, aged 0 to 17 years, took part in a one-day multi-professional trauma-informed assessment of their health and care needs. The assessment model was evaluated by questionnaires and interviews documenting the experiences of the children, their carers, team members and child welfare officers receiving the assessment reports. Findings were communicated to the government and the public.

Results

As expected, the assessments documented frequent physical, mental and developmental needs in this extreme high-risk population. The assessment model was rated positively by all informants, offering important and often new information on child needs to the awareness of their current carers and the child welfare service. The overall evaluation report, launched in 2020, contributed to an ongoing policy development in Norway, aiming to offer routine assessment of needs to all children entering OOHC. The Ombudsman for Children also supported this work, emphasizing the need to establish this as a legal right for the children.

Conclusions

From 2021 multi-professional assessment teams have been established across Norway, with the aim of nationwide coverage. The new Child Welfare Act specifies a duty for local child welfare services to refer all children entering OOHC for assessment of their health needs. This illustrates how research can contribute to successful national policy development.