

WHAT HAPPENS TO RESEARCH? RESPONSES TO A PROJECT ON THE RESIDENTIAL MOVEMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract

This paper discusses one example of research uptake. It reports on how findings from a study on the residential movement of children and young people in one New Zealand community were used. The study sought to gain an understanding of the dynamics of the residential movement of children and young people who were recipients of Child, Youth and Family (CYF) services. This was motivated by a widespread perception in the community that there was a need for improvements in the way these children and young people and their families and care givers are supported. Several factors were critical to the uptake of research findings and subsequent development of support initiatives. Those factors include: the research programme was able to respond to a clearly identified community concern; the local research reference group was proactive in using the findings; the research team engaged with end users; the timeliness of research findings was critical; and research users at policy and operational levels were ready to be informed by the research.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents one example of how a community's involvement in and uptake of research can inform policy and practice. It reports on what happened as a result of a study on the residential movement of children and young people, which was part of a research programme on residential movement and attachment in four communities funded by the Foundation for Research Science and Technology (FRST).

In New Zealand there is growing interest in the potential for policy and practice to be better informed by research. Indeed, the value of research is often judged by whether it provides evidence for decisions. However, the ways in which research can and does have an impact on policy or practice is often complex and unplanned. Although stakeholders may recognise the value of research, its actual influence on their activities may not be easily identified. Research impacts can be subtle or unanticipated, indirect rather than direct; can occur through numerous paths; can take a long time to become apparent; and may be quite different to what stakeholders expect (Hillage et al. 1998). Ultimately, research is just one of many sources of information that can influence policy and practice.

A developing body of inquiry into the links between research and policy shows that if research is to be taken up and used there needs to be more than just the promulgation of results. Research uptake is about raising awareness of issues, understanding the implications of findings, influencing changes in perceptions, beliefs and attitudes, and

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informing decisions and behaviour. Uptake involves use, impact and influence (Jones and Seelig 2004, Nutley et al. 2004, Walter et al. 2003). Key factors in successful research uptake appear to be the readiness of users to engage with findings and their capacity to do so (Jones and Seelig 2004, Walter et al. 2003, Nutley 2003, Ellwood 2003, Hillage et al. 1998, Richardson-Koehler 1987, Rein and White 1977). Networks among researchers and practitioners are important in fostering readiness and increasing capacity, allowing research findings to be communicated and shared both formally and informally.

Commentators have suggested that one way of increasing research uptake is to involve the subjects and users of research more closely in defining the research agenda, in the research process, in decisions about its end use, and in the communication of research findings (Hanley 2005, Nutley 2003, Hovland 2003). These factors emerged in the community that is the focus of this article over the course of the research and facilitated the uptake of findings.

RESEARCH PROGRAMME ON RESIDENTIAL MOVEMENT

The Building Attachment in Communities Affected by Transience and Residential Mobility research programme explores the dynamics and drivers of residential mobility and transience and its impacts on individuals, families and communities. The programme focuses on the critical question of how communities can optimise the benefits of residential mobility while mitigating its potentially negative impacts on individuals, families and communities.

Despite a lack of standard measures of residential mobility and common definitions of frequent movement, international studies and some New Zealand research suggest that high levels of residential mobility can have significant costs for communities, individuals and families. Highly mobile families may find it difficult to access health and education services, to find adequate housing and to remain in employment. There is some evidence that high residential mobility can be detrimental to children's school attendance and learning, although it is also acknowledged that mobility effects may be compounded by other factors (Gilbert 2005, Greater Minnesota Housing Fund 2004, Biddulph et al. 2003, Michigan Public Policy Initiative 2001, Family Housing Fund 2001, The Providence Plan 2002, Conway 1999, Education Review Office 1997, 2007). For one thing, the mobility of frequent movers may exacerbate existing vulnerable circumstances. This may be felt even more by the young, as in New Zealand children and young people have poorer outcomes compared to older people across a number of indicators (Ministry of Social Development 2004).

The challenge of providing effective social services to families frequently on the move has long been recognised as a critical issue in Australia (Eddy 1998, Taylor 1996), Britain (Richardson and Corbishley 1999, Green et al. 2001, Cole et al. 2006) and the United States (ERIC 2003, Lonner et al. 1994, Paik and Phillips 2002).

The research programme explored the patterns and dynamics of residential movement in four different case study communities: two North Island provincial districts, one North Island city suburb and a South Island farming community. The four areas provide examples of communities with strong Māori, Pacific or Pākehā/European bases, which enable an exploration of the meanings, experiences and impacts of

mobility in different ethnic, family/extended family and community contexts. They show different patterns of movement, including communities that simultaneously experience both in and out migration, and where movements of people are changing the community's composition and social dynamics. Distinct local labour markets are apparent, with the communities providing a mix of urban, provincial and rural, industrial and agricultural, and changing seasonal demands for labour. The communities differ in the nature and extent of resources available at both community and family levels, as expressed in incomes, housing and access to local services. Three of the four communities experience considerable levels of disadvantage at an aggregate level, as measured by income, employment and access to amenities and services.

At the beginning of the research programme a critically important development was the establishment of a local research reference group in each of the communities to assist with the design of the research, access to the community, and dissemination and uptake of research findings. The reference groups also identified the community boundaries for each case study.

In two of the four communities participating in the research programme the local research reference groups highlighted widespread perceptions that there was significant movement of children who were CYF clients² into their communities. These perceptions were associated with some local anxieties about the potential negative influence of incoming children on their peers and concerns whether local support structures (government, non-government and caregivers) could cope with their often complex needs.

Because of these perceptions, a study of the movement of CYF clients was developed as part of the wider Building Attachment research programme. Data on movement of CYF clients was obtained from CYF for each of the four case study areas and analysed to identify the patterns of movement of those clients (see Appendix). This article focuses on the community that took up the findings of that investigation, firstly looking at residential movement in that community, and then the findings and uptake of the work on the movement of CYF clients.

RESIDENTIAL MOVEMENT IN THE CASE STUDY COMMUNITY

The community that acted on the study findings on the movement of CYF clients is a small North Island provincial district. It has a relatively high proportion of children and young people, and the population is primarily Māori and European with a low proportion of Pacific people. In the 2006 census 28% of the population were aged 0--14 years, and a further 7.8% were in the 15--19 years age group. This compares with 21.5% of the total population aged 0--14 years and 7.4% aged 15--19 years.

Looking at census data on population movement, this community appeared to experience slightly less movement than the New Zealand population as a whole. In 2006, 24.3% had been living at their current address for less than a year (compared to 24.8% of New Zealand's population), while the proportion living at their current

² Clients include those who are in placements with caregivers, and those who receive other services from CYF.

address for five years or more was 49.2% (compared to 42.3% of New Zealand's population).

Broad aggregate movements apparent in the census mask shifts within the five-year period, and different movement patterns of sections of the population. A more detailed view of local movement showed up in panel data collected over three years as part of the Building Attachment research programme.³ Analysis of 2004 panel data for the community showed that 54% had moved at least once between March 2001 and the end of 2004. Of those movers, almost 72% moved three times or more. Furthermore, circulation between the district and other places in New Zealand and overseas was apparent, as 26% of the panel had returned to live in the district. Movement within a short timeframe of one year was also considerable. The 2005 panel interviews showed that 23% of panel members moved between 2004 and 2005, and the 2006 panel interviews showed that almost 30% moved between 2005 and 2006.

With regard to movement of children and young people, the panel data revealed that between 2004 and 2006 just over one-quarter of those under 18 had left their households, and that a few households had received children. More information about children and young people's movement was gathered through interviews and focus groups with local social service providers and residents in the case study area in 2001-2003 (prior to analysis of CYF data). That work showed that children's and young people's movement was widespread and not confined to those receiving CYF services. There were examples of children choosing to shift around the households of extended family members or friends. Family decisions about placing children in another household also appeared to be relatively common and not confined to any one ethnic group. A change of residence was explained as benefiting the child (e.g. by enabling them to attend a chosen school, by providing more space and a quiet environment, or a safer and more supportive environment). Local social service organisations noted an increasing trend of children moving in with grandparents for a variety of reasons. (Such decisions do not involve CYF.)

There was also the view expressed among service providers within the area that it is hard to provide adequate, responsive and effective services to frequently moving families, whether or not they have any association with CYF. Concerns were expressed about continuity of care of children in families that moved around or stayed only relatively short periods of time in the area. Providers also said that monitoring the care of children moving from one home to another within the area was difficult.

EXPLORING THE ISSUES RAISED ABOUT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT

The research reference group identified a general concern that CYF was placing children from outside the area within the community. There were anxieties about whether local social services could meet the needs of these children and young people, whether schools could cope, and whether supports for caregivers were

³ All members of a selection of households who were 16 years or older were interviewed over three years. In late 2004 a total of 85 people residing in 40 households were interviewed. In late 2005, when interviews were repeated, the panel had grown to 91, due to incomers to the original households. In the final round of interviews, in late 2006, the panel was increased by incomers to 96 individuals.

effective. There was concern that CYF clients coming in to the area were not identified and known to the appropriate agencies. The reference group also voiced some concern about the potentially negative influence of CYF clients on the behaviour of other children and young people in the community. Based on the perceptions of the reference group, an exploratory study of the movement of CYF clients was scoped within the wider research programme. That study was designed to test some of the reference group's assumptions.

A CYF manager acknowledged that placements of children and young people from outside the community are common. Some are placed with relatives within the community and some are sent to caregivers in the area. One issue for the area is that there are not enough local caregivers, and they are often temporary rather than long-term placements, or for respite as required. Consequently, some clients are moved several times. CYF also noted that a minority of families they deal with move around frequently and are therefore more difficult to engage and maintain contact with.

These concerns about the movement of CYF clients are not new, and nor are they confined to any particular area. The Ministerial Review of the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services in 2000 showed that the movement of children and young people is a fundamental factor determining the quality of their care and protection (Brown 2000). The review reported that the average number of placements for any child at that time was 3.1 per year. Multi-placements were referred to as the "drift in care" phenomenon. The review expressed concern at "the enormous disruption to the lives of children caused by the increasing numbers of placement changes" (Brown 2000:70). The CYF Baseline Review (Ministry of Social Development et al. 2003) gave further evidence of "drift" in care, reporting that, on average, children in CYF care spent 2.5 years in care, experienced 10 different placements and were allocated to four different social workers during their time in care. Again, the potentially detrimental effects were emphasised: "Care drift is known to be associated with significant negative child outcomes" (Ministry of Social Development et al. 2003:53).⁴

In order to more systematically explore the issues concerning children and young people receiving CYF services, data were sought on the movements of children and young people (0--17 years old) in the care of CYF into, within or out of each of the four cases study areas for the period 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2003. Anonymised data were obtained through an extract of administrative data from the CYF CYRAS database (the Appendix provides more detail on the method and data limitations). The CYRAS database comprises children and young people who are clients of CYF because they need protection or have committed an offence. Most of these clients are not in a CYF placement.

Data analysis focused on three questions the research reference group wanted answered:

- Were CYF clients a large group within the community?

⁴ Part of the strategy to address the issue of "drift in care" as identified in the Baseline Review has included the implementation of the Permanency Policy in 2006, which was after the study discussed in this article. The goal of the Permanency Policy is to promote the interests and wellbeing of a child or young person by establishing an enduring living arrangement that promotes their sense of belonging, attachment, continuity and stability.

- Were high numbers of children and young people placed by CYF coming into the area?
- Did CYF clients move around frequently?

It should be noted that because of the nature of the data set, the analysis presented below is likely to provide a conservative estimate of movement.

Were CYF Clients a Large Group within the Community?

Analysis of the CYRAS database found that the community was home to 363 CYF clients during the three-year period 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2003. When compared to the three other case study areas, the community had the highest number of children and young people receiving CYF services. CYF clients also appeared to be a substantial group within the community's 0--17-year-old population.⁵ Consequently, it is not surprising that this group is visible to residents and that they have highlighted issues concerning the care and support of these children and young people.

Were High Numbers of Children and Young People Placed by CYF Coming into the Area?

The data indicated that rather than being “out of towners”, most CYF clients were “locals”. Around two-thirds of the children and young people who were CYF clients in June 2004 had their first known address in the community. The data also showed that CYF clients with their first known address in the community are more likely to remain at the same address (i.e. not move at all) than those who come into the area from elsewhere. Furthermore, although the CYRAS data set showed that the community had 25.7% of CYF clients in placements, compared to 10% nationally, a relatively high proportion of placed clients were found to be in family/whānau placements compared to nationally, indicating that these children have connections to the area through kin, and in that sense are not “strangers”.

Did CYF Clients Move Around Frequently?

Although there was a perception in the community that CYF clients moved frequently, the data showed that the majority of CYF clients were settled in the community, with 54% staying at the same address during the three-year period. Thus those who moved constituted fewer than half of clients. Moreover, the majority of those clients who came into the area had no further moves after they arrived. However, of the four case study areas, this community had the shortest stays of CYF clients in the area (at all addresses), and the shortest length of stay at any one address in the area. The median average length of residence at an address in the community was 15.5 weeks.

Summary

⁵ Calculating the number of CYF clients as a proportion of 0--17-year-olds is problematic because the census provides a snapshot of the usually resident population at one point in time, March 2001. Taking a snapshot at March 2001, the data set from CYRAS showed that nationally there were 19,980 CYF clients, comprising 2% of the total population 0--17 years old. In comparison, the community had 86 clients at March 2001, which was 3.4% of its 0--17-year-old population.

In summary, the study was triggered by issues raised by the reference group, and it gave them information about what was happening with children and young people in their community. However, it did not necessarily confirm their assumptions. Findings suggested there was not as much movement of CYF clients as generally assumed in the community, and many clients were locals rather than strangers. But the findings also showed that while over half of CYF clients in the area did not move over the data period, it is clear that some children and young people moved relatively frequently.

To summarise, over the three year period:

- 46% moved at least once
- 15.4% moved three or more times
- 18.4% moved within the area
- 20.3% moved out of the area
- 20 clients had multiple moves in and out of the area.

Those in placements were more likely to move than those not in placements. Almost two-thirds of movers stayed in the area one year or less.

After the report on the analysis of CYF data was completed, it was issued in confidence to reference group members so that they could decide how they wished to use the information. Because the reference group was concerned about the potentially sensitive nature of the findings, and that the community would be viewed negatively due to the perceived number and impact of CYF clients, they decided to first share the findings with the CYF local office rather than disseminate them publicly.

Members of the reference group were keen to engage CYF in a practical response to the findings because they considered that the findings raised issues and identified unmet needs which the community required help to address. The group sought a meeting with CYF in April 2005 to look at ways of addressing the issues. In particular, the reference group was concerned that CYF clients living in the community should receive appropriate support from government agencies. Although it was acknowledged that the research had found that the majority of CYF clients in the community were already residents rather than incomers, there was still considerable concern about the way CYF managed placements and movement of CYF clients into the community. The reference group wanted more co-ordination and information sharing among central government agencies, the local council and community organisations. There was a strong perception that central government agencies had no visible and active presence in the community. They wanted families and caregivers to be more actively supported.

After about a year and various meetings, a governance group was formed consisting of members of the research reference group, community leaders (including the mayor and a district councillor, the college principal, the chief executive of a local economic development organisation, social service providers and kaumātua), a Ministry of Social Development regional representative, a CYF regional representative, the local Strengthening Families manager and the researcher.

The governance group decided to focus on child and youth issues in the community, not just those involving CYF, as other components of the wider research programme had highlighted issues relating to children and young people's wellbeing and

perceptions about child and youth misbehaviour in the community. In addition to the specific issues raised about children and young people receiving services from CYF, problems of public safety involving children and young people in general had been identified as the main safety concern within the community through the panel interviews, focus groups with residents, and interviews with local service providers. Often the issue was not specifically expressed as “crime”, but as youth nuisance or “hanging around” in public places such as shopping centres and recreation areas.

The governance group suggested a project vision, “A safe community”, with the following desired outcomes:

- notification to agencies of CYF clients coming into the area who may be in need of extra support
- placements of CYF clients originating from out of the area to be made in consultation with the local CYF office
- a reduction in youth offending
- a downward trend of youth offenders who are CYF clients
- an improved perception of public safety in the community.

The Ministry of Social Development established a local services mapping project to respond to the research findings (Ministry of Social Development 2006). Local services mapping is aimed at improving the development, planning, delivery and funding of social services to families within communities. The first phase of local services mapping is to identify gaps and overlaps in services and local needs and opportunities, including issues of priority highlighted by the community. In this instance, the placement of CYF children in the community constituted an appropriate issue to initiate a local services mapping exercise aimed at better co-ordinating responses to families in need of services. Using the Building Attachment research findings and information gathered from the community and social service providers, the local services mapping steering group identified key issues relating to youth offending and family isolation. There were also concerns that local residents felt less safe living in the community than previously. Agreed priority areas for action were to improve knowledge about support services for families, improve service co-ordination, and improve communication between government agencies.

Other actions were initiated by government agencies. Strengthening Families undertook to more effectively use existing co-ordination processes to establish a lead person to be responsible for the care plan for a family. CYF responded by implementing a policy change relating to the reporting of CYF clients moving out of an area. CYF also intended to place a social worker in the community for one half day a fortnight, and to establish stronger connections with local CYF caregivers.

An operational group, consisting of governance group members, the local council and other government agency and community representatives (including health, housing and education), is developing support initiatives for young people and their families. The operational group acts as a co-ordination body focusing on early intervention. Reviewing their progress in June 2007, the operational group noted that:

- there is now greater sharing of information between agencies and prompter responses to families needing assistance
- new positions have been established in the community (a youth ambassador works with young people, focusing on creating a safe shopping centre, and a liaison

position for residents to access information on health and social services has been implemented)

- greater effort is made to inform residents about supports available (an Expo day had been held to promote the availability of social services locally, and the local media publishes regular updates and information on initiatives)
- the operational group has visited innovative youth and family programmes in other towns to gather ideas, and is in turn visited by groups from other places wanting to look at its projects.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The research has been of use to the community and government agencies in several ways. It has:

- provided an evidence base for the community to better understand issues it had identified as affecting its children, young people and families
- shown how potentially negative information on a “problem” can be used to positive effect by contributing to the development of solutions
- led to a community-based initiative that not only practically addresses local concerns, but also contributes to policy and practice -- the operational group is a model of how to support and engage in community development
- made a contribution to the wider policy context of child and youth development through its focus on the dynamics of children and young people’s movement.

This case study also suggests some factors that are critical to the uptake of research findings. These factors relate to both research processes and to the attitudes and expectations of potential users of research.

A major factor in the successful uptake of these research findings was the local research reference group, which was aware of the potential benefits of research and understood the implications of the findings. Through that group, community members played a significant role in communicating the research, and started dialogue with agencies to find solutions that would not only improve support for CYF clients and their caregivers but also contribute generally to supporting local families.

It was also important that the Building Attachment research programme was able to respond to a clearly identified community concern and understand its relevance to the overall research agenda. Although the wider research programme was not initially focused on the movement of children and young people receiving CYF services, it was flexible enough to incorporate particular priorities and the preoccupations of potential users.

Another critical factor in achieving uptake has been that the research team has engaged with users, providing written research reports and seminars to community groups and government agencies. However, on its own, communication of findings is not enough. Timeliness of research findings is also important for uptake. The research on CYF clients’ movement was offered at a time when CYF and the Ministry of Social Development were turning their attention to issues relating to care and placement policies, and looking at improving supports for communities. In this respect, there was a readiness among research users at both the policy and operational levels in those agencies to be informed by relevant research.

APPENDIX: METHOD

Following discussions with CYF staff regarding reliability issues, it was agreed that the data extract should be limited to the period 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2003. The specific target population was defined as current CYF clients who had resided at an address within one of the four Building Attachment case study areas at any time in that period. The data extract thus captured only those children and young people who were current CYF clients at the time of the extract in June 2004.

To aid in the specification of variables for inclusion in the data extract, CYF provided a sample extract from the CYRAS database. This sample enabled the research team to test the analysis method, clarify definitional anomalies, and refine the parameters of the query used in the data extract. Data were cleaned before analysis to refine the extract. Seven hundred and eighty children and young people remained in the extract following data cleaning. The data extract was provided as an Excel sheet with variable information in text format. The data were re-coded and imported into SPSS to enable univariate analysis of frequencies and cross-tabulations.

Mapping Movement

The data set shows moves within the period that are before arrival into a case study area (if applicable), as well as moves within the area and moves out. Movement of CYF clients during the period was quantified using a count of addresses for each person. A small number of addresses were not known. The number of movements for each person was then calculated by subtracting 1 from their total number of addresses.

Data Limitations

There is no research that systematically profiles the characteristics and movement of children and young people who are CYF clients. This lack of comparable data makes it difficult to assess how representative the data from the current analysis are. The findings should be treated with caution, in that they only provide a snapshot of movement for a group of children and young people within a specified time period. The data should not be seen as generalisable to represent the experience of all children and young people who are CYF clients.

The data extract captured children and young people who were current CYF clients at June 2004. It is unclear whether the profile of children and young people who were no longer CYF clients at June 2004 varies substantially from the children and young people in the sample. It is also not possible for the purposes of this analysis to quantify the number of children and young people who may have resided in one of the case study areas during the sample period of 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2003 but who were no longer clients as at 30 June 2004. Furthermore, the data extract focused on the four case study areas of the Building Attachment research programme, and so is not generalisable outside of these areas.

There are also complications relating to the use of administrative data for the purposes of this analysis. As a primarily administrative database, the CYF CYRAS is a dynamic relational database not designed for the type of inquiry intended in this

research. The nature of the database as an administrative tool for case managers means that information is entered by many users, so the reliability of the data depends on the accuracy and timeliness of those inputting the information. There is a possibility that address changes are under-reported, and eligible clients may have been excluded due to incomplete or incorrect address information.

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