

# **Using Governmental data records for research: A case study of understanding characteristics and reasons for social care workers referrals to the POVA List in England and Wales**

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## **Background:**

Protecting and safeguarding children have been of high importance for policy makers over the past 30 years in the United Kingdom, resulting in ever-increasing levels of surveillance of workers in this area. Latterly, adult protection has emerged as a key concern in social care policy and practice and has new prominence in the regulatory and modernising framework (Lathlean *et al.* 2006). Successive legislation increasingly regulates the social care workforce in order to reduce the risks of abuse and neglect. One element of adult protection policy in England and Wales, introduced by the Care Standards Act 2000, is referrals to the Protection of Vulnerable Adults (POVA) List (introduced in 2004). Once placed on the POVA List, a referred person is barred from working with or volunteering with vulnerable adults for ten years, although there is a right of appeal. The scheme underwent reform when the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 (implemented as from 2009). This Act introduced a new National Information System for Police Intelligence, to combine information from the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), the POVA and POCA lists and List 99. A single registration scheme for anyone wanting to work or volunteer with children or adults in vulnerable situations is also to be established. Ultimate responsibility for the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) is with the Home Office.

## **Methods**

This paper reports on part of a multi-method study (2006-07) including quantitative and qualitative elements, to produce an understanding of the prevalence of different types of alleged abuse, characteristics of referred staff and a rounded picture of the factors involved in decisions to place staff members on the POVA List (see Stevens et al. 2008; Hussein et al. 2009). To achieve the first two aims, the team responsible for processing referrals and making recommendations about suitability, based with the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES), provided the research team with anonymous records of all POVA referrals from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2004 to 17<sup>th</sup> November 2006. These contained 5294 cases where referrals were concerned with adults and excluded those that had been cross-referred from the List relating to children (POCA). The full record set included some limited information on the characteristics of the referred person as well as their work settings. It also included a coding of type of alleged abuse as well as a very brief description of the situation. Such description was used by the research team to validate type of abuse recorded and to conclude whether other types of alleged abuse may have been also present. Previous definitions and categories of abuse, such as those contained within 'No Secrets' (Department of Health, 2000), were used as much as possible. However, due to the very limited information provided about characteristics of referred people and absence of any information about the 'victim,' it was impossible to identify other possible types of abuse such as 'discriminatory abuse'. In order to gain more insight into the circumstances of referrals the researchers requested all written information accompanying a sample of 298 referrals (about 5% of all records). This sample was purposefully selected to represent more confirmed than unconfirmed cases. This was to allow enough numbers in each of the main outcome groups for comparison in relation to different background characteristics. For the third aim of the study, the research collected primary qualitative data through interviews, focus groups and employing vignettes of hypothetical scenarios of possible referrals.

The current paper focuses on the methods adopted to extract necessary data from the records to enable the statistical examination of the prevalence of different types of alleged harm and their association with various staff, employer and service users' characteristics. It discusses the challenges associated with using large governmental data records, which are not originally designed for specific quantitative data analysis, and illustrates various approaches adopted by the research team to extract, validate and refine such data. Although the secondary data of the referral records provided a number

of advantages it posed another set of challenges. On one hand, government records offer a unique opportunity to study and examine relationships, in this case the associations between different types of alleged abuse and staff characteristics, through the use of accurate, complete and up-to-date records which are very difficult to be substituted through a retrospective survey, for example. The data, as most government records, offered us a 'census' of the incidents under study that had not been subjected to any recall errors or other biases associated with respondents. Another advantage is the reduced costs associated with using existing records compared to implementing own survey or other data collection tools.

On the other hand, the research team was aware of a number of challenges and attempted to address these when analysing the data and designing other elements of the study. Such challenges stem from the very purpose of these records; they are to 'keep' records and are not initially designed to answer a specific research question or to be even 'researched'. Such purpose is essential in deciding on important factors such as, details of recording, consistency in coding, level of observation and the quality of documentation. However, in this particular case, the purposes of keeping such records were more or less in line with the purpose of the study, which was to 'monitor' level, nature and circumstances of alleged abuse cases within the work environment. Here we will discuss how we dealt with different challenges while undertaking the current study.

### ***Coding and consistency:***

It was clear when we started the analysis that the design of data recording was not initially thought of as an important aspect and, of course, was not for the purpose of the research. The records provided information on every single referral during the period covered by the study, this was regardless of whether the staff member was eventually placed on the list or not. For each record, data were available on some of the staff member's personal characteristics, namely: age, place of work and job role. For each record type of alleged abuse was only coded into three broad categories (physical, emotional and sexual) with a fourth large group of 'other' type of abuse. Luckily each record included some free text summary of the incidents.

Three important types of alleged abuse were missing from coding, namely: financial, discriminatory and neglect. Alleged financial abuse was regarded by the team to be a relatively straightforward category that may be identified directly from the free text alone without further information on the circumstances and the personal characteristics of both alleged abuser and abused persons, unlike, for example, discriminatory abuse. The team made a list of key words related to

financial abuse including steal, theft, finance, money, credit and their derivatives. Then a computer (C++) programme was developed to identify keywords in the descriptive text indicating the prevalence of financial abuse. All records identified containing one of the key words were read and checked to see any element of financial abuse emerged. The programme was refined by drawing additional random samples of records and descriptions of abuse were read with any additional key words identified. This resulted in identifying 1209 records including an element of financial abuse consequently the ‘Other’ type of abuse category was therefore refined (see examples in Table 1). A similar process was adopted with ‘job role’.

**Table 1 Examples of some records identified to contain some element of financial abuse**

<b><i>Description of Misconduct</i></b>	<b><i>Physical</i></b>	<b><i>Sexual</i></b>	<b><i>Emotional</i></b>	<b><i>Other</i></b>	<b><i>Financial</i></b>
Stole money from service users	F	F	F	T/ F	T
Stole money from four service users and defrauding the company of £#,###, by falsifying records.	F	F	F	T/ F	T
Financial discrepancies have occurred on several occasions, whilst Mr X was shopping with a service user.	F	F	F	T/ F	T
Mr Y was caught stealing from a service user. The incident has left the service user feeling distressed emotionally	F	F	T	T/ F	T

***Coverage:***

In addition there were a number of important data included, e.g. date of referral and closure etc, and the final decision about the referral if applicable. In addition to the efforts explained above to extract more information on the type of abuse and break down the ‘other’ group into more specific misconducts other information was more difficult to extract from the records, including gender.

To overcome such gaps we requested all detailed written information on a sample of records to extract further information and include them into a separate set of analyses. A sample of 298 referrals representing about 5% of all records was obtained. This sample was purposefully selected to represent more confirmed than unconfirmed cases. This

allowed enough numbers in each of the main outcome groups for comparison in relation to different background characteristics. This sample contained equal proportion of cases that were: 1) confirmed on the POVA List; 2) still being investigated; and 3) where a decision had been taken not to confirm the individual on the List. Sample referrals were selected at random from each group of possible outcome. Among the full referral population, 35% (n=1876) were still being investigated, 58% (3055) not confirmed and only 7% (363) were confirmed on the List. The distribution of referred persons by age, job role and service provider was similar between the sample and the population. The purpose of the sample was only to complement the results obtained from the referral population particularly on missing characteristics. From this sample we were able to extract further information related to the personal characteristics of referred staff, the process of referrals, involvement of other agencies in the process, including police investigations, overall characteristics of alleged victims and enabled us to identify further types of abuse; namely 'Neglect'.

Although the sample records offered an opportunity to fill many gaps in the full records for the purpose of the analysis. However, the process of reading all written documents and coding and entering the data was very time consuming and we had to limit the sample to a maximum number, in this case 300 referrals.

### ***Limitations:***

Despite making every attempt to maximise the benefit of the already existing secondary data from government records a number of issues remained under explored. We were not able to include ethnicity of either staff or users as it was not recorded in full records and available only in very few detailed records provided in the sample. There was also a general lack of specific information on alleged misconduct; staff characteristics, service users' characteristics and we were only able to infer users' characteristics from the registration categories of employers.

### **Conclusion**

As this case study shows, government data records offer a unique source of data that are usually a census of a topic. The logical consequence is the ability to report findings with confidence as information reflect the experience of a whole 'population'. However, several important issues emerged that researchers need to address when performing any analysis using similar records. As a starting point all records need to be anonymous before given to the researchers (an issue that government takes seriously).

When starting analysing such data it is important to appreciate that such records are usually kept for a different purpose than that of research. Directly following is the high possibility that data recording and entry do not usually follow pre-agreed categorizations, which are essential when performing any statistical analysis. Using such data thus require elaboration and dedicated time for data mining, processing and pre-analysis work. It is also important to think flexibly and innovatively to maximise the many benefits government data record offer through using a variety of skills and techniques, including computer programming as well as drawing on other documents that may provide additional useful information.

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