

Parental social licence for data linkage for service intervention’ – Written Submission (PSC0003)

Submission to the Public Services Committee on the role of public services in addressing child vulnerability

Response to call for evidence from `research team: Rosalind Edwards (University of Southampton), Val Gillies (University of Westminster) and Sarah Gorin (University of Southampton)

One of the premises of the Committee’s call for evidence is that public services should share data as part of their duty to keep children safe. ¶

We provide evidence that the Committee needs to consider the wider implications and interests of operational data sharing and data linkage for early intervention (which also can be taken as lessons from Covid-19), in particular: ¶

- → The importance of transparency and informed consent to use of their administrative records for all parents ¶
- → The wider social legitimacy of and trust in institutions, especially for marginalised social groups of parents ¶

Background

1. Early intervention based on operational data sharing and data linking involves predictive modelling. The integration and analysis of administrative records from health, education, housing, social care, social security, criminal justice and other public services includes the use of data about all parents of dependent children. Local authorities often contract with commercial companies to create the data hubs and algorithmic analytics used. These integration and outsourcing operational practices lie outside of automatic social acceptance norms, social trust and consensus, so social licence for them needs to be ascertained.
2. All parents are stakeholders in the use of administrative records for data linkage and predictive analytics for targeting service intervention. Yet, there is no easily accessible means, such as a public register, for parents to find out what is happening with their own data. What little public consultation there has been about sharing and linkage of administrative records has usually focused on anonymised data for research purposes, and involved focus group discussion. It is important to listen to and take account of the views of those directly affected: parents of dependent children, about what is acceptable or unacceptable in relation to their data.

Evidence base

3. The *Parental social licence for data linkage project for service intervention* project¹ is providing a comprehensive understanding of social licence for and trust in operational data linkage and analytics among parents of dependent children.
4. We commissioned an online and telephone probability-based panel survey of parents of dependent children across the UK (NatCen) to examine parental social licence for data linkage and predictive analytics as a basis for intervention in family lives, under what circumstances, by what bodies, and for what purposes, and to assess if there is any discernible consensus on these issues. The sample consisted of 843 parents, of whom 57% were mothers, 73% were White British, and 44% were in managerial and professional occupations. We analysed the data using the consensus baseline approach to identify parental social licence.² An overview of key results is discussed below.
5. We are in the process of writing up the findings from the survey, and we will also be exploring the views of different sub-populations of parents of dependent children through group discussions, and service user experiences through individual interviews. We will be reporting on them in due course.

Transparency and informed consent

6. A majority of parents surveyed are aware that administrative records are collected and digitally stored about them (72%) but only just over half know that digital administrative records from different sources can be linked together to find out more about individual families (53%). There is a strong judgement that families generally do not know or understand how their administrative records are used (60% with a consensus threshold of 50%). There is overwhelming agreement that Government should publicise how they link and use families' data (81% with a consensus threshold of 50%).
7. There is a strong view that parents need to be asked permission for administrative records about their family to be linked together (60% with a consensus threshold of 50%). Some marginalised groups of parents had an even stronger consensus about this, such as Black parents and lone parents (each at 66%).

¹ The research is funded by the UKRI Economic and Social Research Council under grant number ES/T001623/1: <http://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/parentdata/about/>

² The consensus baseline approach takes account of the number of response choices available to a question in order to determine what constitutes a social licence consensus, e.g. for a two response options question, rather than more than 50% being taken as a majority consensus, if one of the options gathers half was many responses again: 75%, then that represents a widespread social licence; with 50% for a three option question, etc. The information presented here is for three response options.

8. Transparency and informed consent to use of their family administrative records is important for parents of dependent children. The need for consent is stronger among some marginalised groups of parents, which raises issues about the implications of operational data linkage for social legitimacy and trust.

Social legitimacy and trust in data linkage and institutions

9. Among parents as a whole in the sample there is a clear generalised social licence consensus for joining families' administrative records to enable early intervention: identifying families that might need support, catching problems early, targeting services at particular families, and identifying risk of child abuse (Table 1). It is important to note, however, that this general trust is variable between different social groups of parents (Table 1 and paragraphs 11 and 12).
10. While parents may grant social licence for joining families' administrative records to enable early intervention in a generalised sense, when it comes to considering the use of data linkage by specific public services such children's social work teams, local council education services, early years services, police and criminal justice, and immigration, there are differences between services in whether or not trust is extended (Table 2). It is also important to note that any trust and legitimacy extended is variable between different social groups of parents (Table 2 and paragraphs 11 and 12).

**Table 1: Acceptability or unacceptability of reasons for joining together administrative records:
50% consensus threshold**

Reasons:	All sample (%)	Higher occupation/ qualification/ income parents (%)	Black parents (%)	Lone parents (%)	Younger parents (18-29) (%)	Parents in 5+ member households (%)
Identifying families that might need support for services even if they have not asked for it	82	86	62	74	78	80
Saving time and money by catching family problems early	83	87	71	78	84	85
Making services more efficient by identifying families that need help and targeting services at them	84	87	69	84	73	79
Identifying families where children could be at risk of abuse	90	94	85	91	84	89

11. There is more likely to be social licence consensus and trust for operational data linkage among parents who are in managerial and professional occupations and have higher levels of qualifications and incomes, reflecting the patterns of legitimacy for the sample as a whole, or granting social licence at a higher consensus. For example, generalised social licence for joining families' administrative records to enable early intervention achieves somewhat higher consensus than among the sample as a whole (Table 1), but there is similarity with the sample as a whole in whether or not trust is extended to specific public services with variations hovering above and below the consensus threshold (Table 2).

**Table 2: Trust in organisations to join together administrative records to identify families to target public services
50% consensus threshold**

Services:	All sample (%)	Higher occupation/ qualification / income	Black parents (%)	Lone parents (%)	Younger parents (18-29) (%)	Parents in 5+ member house-
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		(%)				holds (%)
Children’s social work teams	55	55	38	52	50	55
Local council education services	47	48	39	43	48	51
Early years services	50	52	43	47	45	52
Police and criminal justice	49	49	28	43	50	54
Immigration	35	33	24	31	34	38

12. There is less likely to be social licence consensus for operational data linkage among marginalised social groups of parents. In particular, while Black parents do hold parental social licence for joining families’ administrative records to enable early intervention, this is at a lower consensus than among the sample as a whole (Table 1). Further Black parents do not hold a consensus of trust in any public services concerning their use of data linkage, especially not police and criminal justice, and immigration services (Table 2). They also hold an overwhelming consensus that information collected about services users is not always accurate (79%), that data linkage will lead to discrimination against some families (57%), and that it can put families off accessing services when they need them (62%) (all with a consensus threshold of 50%).

13. Other marginalised social groups of parents do not extend social licence to aspects of operational data linkage for early intervention, notably lone parents, younger parents, and parents in larger families. There is no social licence among lone parents for data linkage by many public services (Table 2). Rather, there is a consensus that the information collected about services users is not always accurate (63%), that data linkage will lead to discrimination against some families (52%), and that it can put families off accessing services when they need them (52%) (all with a consensus threshold of 50%). Similarly, younger parents extend no social licence for data linkage by many public services (Table 2), and hold consensus that the information collected about services users is not always accurate (57%) and that data linkage will lead to discrimination against some families (60%). Parents in larger families did grant social licence for a variety of public services to use data linkage, being more trusting than the sample as a whole (Table 2), but nonetheless hold a consensus that the information collected about services users is not always accurate (62%), and that data linkage can put families off accessing services when they need them (54%) (all with a consensus threshold of 50%).

14. Further, there is no parental social licence for outsourcing to commercial companies to use algorithms to target public services, with a consensus against this among the sample as a whole (55% with a

consensus threshold of 50%), and amongst parents in the higher occupation, qualification and income group (57%), Black parents (60%), lone parents (62%), younger parents (51%) and parents in households with 5+ members (53%).

15. Operational data linkage for early intervention is acceptable to parents of dependent children at an abstract level, but they are more circumspect when considering the specifics of trusting particular public services to do this, and there is no social licence for the involvement of commercial companies. There is less social licence for data linkage among marginalised social groups of parents, with some holding little trust in public services implementing data linkage. This lack of social licence should be a concern for policy prescriptions about sharing and linking families' administrative records for early intervention.

Implications

16. Government needs to be transparent about how they link and use families' data and to gain parents' informed consent. But policy-makers also need to realise that information about this use of data for early intervention and efforts towards obtaining informed consent are likely to be received and judged quite differently among different social groups of parents. Generalised messages and initiatives have the potential to bolster social licence among parents in the higher occupation, qualification and income group, while running the risk of engendering further disengagement among marginalised social groups of parents, for example with active avoidance of essential health and education services, etc.
17. Early intervention relies on predictive analytics. This work can be outsourced to commercial companies, where there is no parental social licence for this operational practice. The questions of transparency and consent, and social licence among marginalised parents that we draw attention to above, seem all the more pressing in a context where social legitimacy is put at risk for an operational practice that has shown little evidence of efficacy³ and evidence of built-in discrimination in data bases.⁴ Such discrimination will likely contribute to further inequalities and lack of trust among marginalised groups of parents of dependent children.
18. It is vital to pay attention to the extent of social licence and trust for data linkage among marginalised groups of parents in society. At a

³ E.g. Clayton V, Sanders M, Schoenwald E, Surkis L and Gibbons D (2020) *Machine Learning in Children's Services*, What Works for Children's Social Care: https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WWCSC_machine_learning_in_childrens_services_does_it_work_Sep_2020_Accessible.pdf; Salganik MJ, Lundberg I, Kindel AT and 115 others (2020) *Measuring the predictability of life outcomes with a scientific mass collaboration*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(15): 8398-8403, DOI:10.1073/pnas.1915006117.

⁴ E.g. Amnesty International United Kingdom Section (2018) *Trapped in the Matrix: Secrecy, Stigma, and Bias in the Met's Gangs Database*: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/reports/Trapped%20in%20the%20Matrix%20Amnesty%20report.pdf>

collective level, these are parents who are most likely to be implicated in such efforts towards early intervention. Implementation of sharing and linking of data amongst public services working with children and families has the potential to further undermine social legitimacy and trust among marginalised social groups of parents, with consequences for a cohesive and equal society.

March 2021