Identifying the Need for Upstream Social Marketing in Child Welfare Services

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Introduction

The future of the Finnish welfare state is widely debated as the increasingly unfavorable dependency ratio threatens its financial basis. Simultaneously, the system faces a continuous and rapid growth in the demand for child welfare services. It is widely acknowledged that a significant shift towards earlier intervention is needed. However, research on child welfare has not adequately addressed the role of preventive services from service system and customer centric perspectives. Particularly noteworthy is the lack of research transcending the social and heath service domain. Further, the prevalent research disregards the new preventive service opportunities arising from both upstream social marketing and a broader outlining of the service system.

Method

The aim of our study was to identify social factors relating to the demand for child welfare services in all three hundred and sixteen (316) Finnish municipalities. Specifically, we applied correlation and cluster analyses to explore which of the thirty-seven (37) variables - describing municipal economy, welfare service usage, and family life situations - are related to the use of the child welfare services and how municipalities with relatively high or low levels of service demand differ from one another.

Results

The Spearman's rho showed that there was a medium positive correlation ($0.30 < r > 0.41$, $p < .001$) between seven variables and the use of child welfare services. Table 1 shows these seven variables. Variables *community care in child welfare* and *placement outside home* were selected to perform a k-means cluster analysis. The analysis produced three clusters that where then profiled and named as *low need*, *average need*, and *high need*. Table 1 shows the mean values for the cluster as well as the profiling variables. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the differences between the means scores. There were statistically significant differences between the mean values in three of the profiling variables (*property offences*, *social assistance*, and *housing allowance*).

Table 1 Mean Values of the Cluster Variables

Cluster variables (bolded) and profiling variables	Cluster 1: Low need	Cluster 2: Average need	Cluster 3: High need
1 **Community care in child welfare**	**3.46**	**6.74**	**10.36**
2 **Placements outside home**	**0.93**	**1.40**	**1.54**
3 Unemployment	10.25	12.14	14.07
4 Property offences	21.62*[ab]	26.33*[a]	27.67*[b]
5 Single parent families	16.82	18.11	19.80
6 Social assistance	6.72*[ab]	7.87*[ac]	9.22*[bc]
7 Housing allowance	3.29*[ab]	4.56*[a]	5.10*[b]
8 Children in hospital care for mental disorder	3.12	4.46	6.07
Percentage of municipalities (%)	31.65	50.32	17.41
Number of municipalities (*n*=316)	100	159	55

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.
The significant difference is [a] between 1 and 2, [b] between 1 and 3, [c] between 2 and 3.

Discussion

Our results show that a higher demand for child welfare services is linked to problems with family livelihood (*unemployment, housing allowance*), family cohesion (*single parent families*), and crime (*property offences*). These cross sectional relationships may indicate that the root causes explaining the need for child welfare services are in fact external to the social and the health domains.

Based on the results we identify a need for social policies, service systems, and service practices facilitating both (1) the cross sector collaboration and (2) upstream service solutions. As regards upstream service solutions we suggest that effective early interventions should be family specific and customer centric, taking broadly into account their unique situations in life. In conclusion, this study sheds new light upon rethinking the welfare service system as a cross-sectoral and communal service platform, that is, an extended family livelihood and well-being service system.

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