



Research protocol: A cluster-randomised study evaluating the effectiveness of a skill-training programme for social work professionals for improving the follow-up of low-income families within Norwegian welfare services



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a protocol for a cluster-randomised study that evaluates the effectiveness of a skill-training programme for social work professionals with the aim of improving the follow-up of low-income families within Norwegian labour and welfare services. The protocol describes the programme as well as the research design of the trial. While the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration is responsible for developing and implementing the programme, researchers at Oslo and Akershus University College are conducting an independent evaluation of its effectiveness. The cluster-randomised field experiment will take place over a 40-month period, involving 29 labour and welfare offices, 58 family coordinators and, based on estimations, 650 families. The research is funded by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. The agency have reviewed the protocol.

1. Introduction

Family-focused interventions have gained increasing attention within contemporary welfare services, as changing family patterns and weaker family ties have been identified as a part of new social risks (Bonoli, 2013; Churchill & Sen, 2016). The development also derives from recent trends within welfare policies, especially the social investment perspective, where the importance of preventative interventions is emphasised in order to improve the situation for children and young people (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Morel, Palme, & Palier, 2012). While family-focused interventions have been a common part of welfare policies in the UK and the US (White, Warrener, Reeves, & La Valle, 2008), they have been less common in the Nordic countries, where universal welfare services and income transfers have been the main political tools aimed at reducing poverty (Fløtten & Grødem, 2014).

Despite universal welfare services and rather generous income transfers, the amount of child poverty has increased in Norway over the past decade. In 2014, 9.4% of all children lived in a household with a persistent risk of low income. Lack of employment among parents, which is particularly prevalent among immigrants, is the main reason for child poverty; half of the children at risk of persistent low income have an immigrant background (Kirkeberg & Epland, 2016). Accordingly, the Norwegian Social Services Act and the Act of Norwegian Welfare Services state that vulnerable children, youth and their families ought to receive comprehensive and coordinated welfare services. Despite the centrality of the family perspective, there are no nationwide programmes specifying

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how the services for low-income families should be followed up and coordinated. In order to respond to this lack of attention, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration has developed a skill-training programme (HOLF¹) for social work professionals with the aim of improving the comprehensive follow-up of low-income families. In 2016, the programme was developed and piloted in three labour and welfare offices (NAV offices). In addition to tools and methods for case-based counselling, seminars and supervision structures, the project also introduces family coordinators as a new position in labour and welfare services. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration has commissioned an independent evaluation conducted by researchers at Oslo and Akershus University College. A total of 29 NAV offices are taking part in this nationwide trial with a cluster-randomised design. The evaluation began on 1.1 2016 with a pilot phase and will run for 3.5 years. Of the 29 participating NAV offices, 15 have been randomised to the experimental group and 14 to the control group. The randomisation into experimental and control groups was conducted as a blinded manual draw from a bowl by an impartial person on October 14th 2016 at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy. Representatives from the Labour and Welfare Administration and researchers observed the randomisation procedure. While the experimental group offices implement the HOLF programme, offices that have been randomised to the control group work will develop local family projects.

2. The HOLF programme

2.1. The development of the programme

In 2014, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration commissioned a literature review summarising existing knowledge related to family projects in the Nordic countries and in the UK (Fløtten & Grødem, 2014). The review demonstrated that, although some family projects existed, most were locally developed and implemented and few of them had been evaluated. Although no single model of family intervention was identified as effective, there were some elements across models that were considered to be important. These include a comprehensive follow-up by a dedicated family coordinator, empowering follow-up processes, the level of qualifications and suitability of employees, and the coordination of inter-professional services. The project group at the Labour and Welfare Administration also studied previous national grants for projects with the aim of reducing child poverty, visited eight of these projects and discussed project plans with corresponding agencies within the policy field. Thus, the literature review and the additional preparations demonstrated a need to develop a national programme for low-income families that would be suitable for the context of Norwegian labour and welfare services.

The project group at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration began to develop the HOLF programme in 2015. In 2016, elements of the programme were piloted in three NAV offices. As a part of the piloting phase, two family coordinators were employed in each of the three pilot offices, and the experiences from the pilot were evaluated by researchers (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2016).

2.2. The goals and objectives of the programme

The long-term goal of the HOLF programme is to prevent intergenerational transmission of poverty, while short-term objectives are to develop and implement a programme that can improve the follow-up of low-income families, enhance goal-focused follow-up skills for professionals and improve the coordination of existing services. In their work with the families, family coordinators should especially aim at improving parental employment, the housing situation, and the financial situation, and enhancing the social inclusion of the children.

2.3. Training and supervision of family coordinators and leaders within experimental group offices

The programme is described in two manuals. The *HOLF process manual* describes the work of the family coordinators as well as the model, tools and details in the work processes. The *HOLF implementation manual* describes the implementation of the model at local offices. The implementation manual also addresses responsibilities of office leaders and their tasks within the implementation of the programme (The Norwegian Labour & Welfare Administration, 2016a, 2016b).

During the project period, there will be six seminars for family coordinators and office leaders within the 15 offices randomised to the experimental group. Each seminar treats a specific perspective of the HOLF programme, such as the child perspective and the various forms coordinators use for follow-up, with home-based tasks in between seminars. The supervision of family coordinators follows a train-the-trainer principle, where the project group within the Labour and Welfare Administration supervises and trains six family coordinators from the pilot offices, who in turn supervise and train the 30 family coordinators from the 15 experimental group offices. Each office and family coordinator from experimental group offices will have two dedicated trainers from the pilot offices who will frequently follow up and supervise the implementation process. Supervision is partially conducted in face-to-face meetings and partially over the internet. Office leaders are seen as key persons when it comes to the implementation, thus they have defined tasks for establishing inter-professional collaboration, and also for supporting the work of family coordinators within the NAV offices. Office leaders are directly followed by the project group from the Labour and Welfare Administration to ensure that the plans for the implementation are followed.

¹ Norwegian acronym for Comprehensive follow-up of low-income families

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